

An Assessment of the Necessity of Offering College English Courses for Art Majors

Mimi Lu*

Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology, Haikou, 571126, China

*Corresponding author: gudushangdi1@163.com

Abstract: *With the trend of internationalisation in contemporary art activities, many art students need to be proficient in English to take part in foreign exhibitions and cross-cultural collaborations. Most of the current general English courses focus on daily life and do not meet the authentic language demands of art majors. The three reasons for offering College English courses are the structure of language ability, support for curriculum construction and other necessary reasons. The Language Needs of Art Majors are high in context-dependence and very specific. College English classes can introduce good works of literature for the students and help them improve their language skills, thinking and cultural literacy. Cognition and semiotics work together to offer an understanding of the many effects of foreign-language thinking and the way in which linguistic and non-linguistic signs operate in this course.*

Keywords: *Art Major, College English Course, English for Specific Purposes, Structure of Language Competence, Synergy of Semiotic Systems*

Introduction

For a long time, whether art majors need special College English courses has been one of the problems in the curriculum design of higher art education. Most of the creation of art is non-verbal, such as in visual arts, music and drama; therefore, it may be thought that language skills are not required for artistic ability. According to the operating mode of the international art scene, English has been spread in all areas of art creation and sharing, such as exhibition applications, curatorial communication and artwork statements. General English courses can teach some basic grammar and daily life, but they cannot cover the network of terminology, rhetorical devices and cultural metaphors in artistic discourse. Due to the shortage of supply and demand, art students cannot obtain language materials for their daily study; they are unable to acquire creative materials from abroad and thus lose the interest of exploring other cultures through art. Therefore, we need to systematically explore the special features of College English courses for art majors, clarify what makes them different from general English courses, and provide a theoretical basis for curriculum construction.

1. Language Competence Structure and Curriculum Requirements for Art Majors

1.1 Characteristics of English Application Scenarios for Art Majors

The main reasons for using English among art majors fall into two categories: academic study and other life. First of all, when writing application materials and other correspondence for the review of international art exhibitions, biennials and residency programs, one should have good formal written English skills. Second, in the course of learning art history and theory, many of the primary materials, critical collections and artist interviews are in English, and without the ability to read English, it will be difficult to obtain this original information directly. Third, in cross-cultural collaborative creation, team members need to use English to present ideas, express creative goals and organise technical specifications; thus, language should be employed as an essential tool in addition to the creative medium. The above cases have given rise to new demands for English in terms of stylistic register, density of specialised vocabulary and real-time interactive ability; these are not the same as the general requirements for English.

According to the size of language skills, there are different quantities of input and output in English among art majors. Reading and listening are used to learn about new developments in cutting-edge

technology around the world, exhibition regulations and peer reviews; writing and speaking are generally used to present curatorial ideas, write artwork statements and participate in review defences. The latter has a higher demand for grammatical correctness, logical sense and cultural appropriateness of metaphors; otherwise, the meaning of works of art will not be fully conveyed in Chinese. Most of the current college English courses focus on daily communication and general text reading; they do not cover the specific types of language tasks that art majors need in detail, and thus students find it difficult to apply them in real life.

1.2 Cross-linguistic Accessibility of Terminology in Art Disciplines

The system of terminology for art disciplines has two levels: descriptive terms and theoretical terms. Descriptive terms are words that are easy to link with media, techniques and materials, such as "watercolor", "composition" and "texture", and they have a relatively good cross-linguistic accessibility. Theoretical terms are abstract ideas in different historical periods or under various systems of criticism, such as "gaze", "simulacrum" and "site-specificity", and all kinds of language systems show changes in the meaning of these terms. As one of the basic languages for the production of contemporary art discourse, many critical theories and curatorial discourses are first published in English and then translated into other languages. Non-native English-speaking art students who only use translated works will have the dual problem of information lag and misinterpretation^[1].

The degree of term availability can be shown by how difficult it is to create new words and metaphors. Art criticism often uses interdisciplinary terms from philosophy, semiotics and psychology, such as "deconstruction", "liminality" and "heterotopia"; although these terms have established rules for their use in English academic writing, the corresponding terms in the Chinese art field often fail to cover all the areas of their reference. College English courses should systematically present the core terminological networks of the art disciplines and help students learn the word-formation logic, synonymy relations and contextual variations of English terminology; thus, they can improve the validity of students' understanding of original texts and reduce semantic loss caused by intermediate translation links. Without this attribute, it will be difficult for the students to join the world of higher education and they will only be able to use materials that have already been translated for their learning and creation.

1.3 The Language Threshold of Artistic Expression and International Communication

The spread of art abroad is based on the function of language to refer to visual signs. Although the works are non-verbal, curatorial forewords, catalogue essays and artist statements still need to be written in English to provide a sense of cultural inheritance and help cross-cultural understanding of the works. The three ways the language threshold can be expressed are as follows. First, there is a problem of grammatical structure that may hinder students' understanding; for instance, in English, the subjunctive mood and conditional adverbial clauses are used to distinguish between "factual descriptions" and "hypothetical speculations", and confusion between the two can lead to a misunderstanding of the purpose of the writing. Second, the level of formality in the style of address affects the credibility of academic writing; if too much colloquial language is used to introduce works of art, it will likely not be approved by professional review departments. Third, whether the cultural reference is appropriate will determine how well the author can provide the necessary background knowledge for English-speaking readers, and direct translation of Chinese idioms often results in a lack of understanding^[2].

In actual operation, the language barrier in cross-cultural communication for art exchange is often an illusion; thus, it is believed that this problem can be solved by translation tools. Machine translation can handle declarative knowledge but cannot express the nuances of expression, rhetorical devices and other demands of reflective writing. When art majors write artwork statements, research proposals or exhibition applications, they need to show their own depth of thought and originality; therefore, these texts should not be technical manuals or press releases, but rather, the quality of the language in these documents also reflects professional ability. If the College English courses are still at the level of general English, they will not be sufficient to help the students cross this threshold; specifically designed English teaching for the art context can systematically reduce students' language barriers in international communication by using genre analysis and moving to practice and lexical collocation training.

2. Supporting Dimensions of College English Courses for the Cultivation of Artistic Talent

2.1 The Growing Importance of Language Skills in Learning Creative Works

The three kinds of knowledge for artistic creation are visual images, physical materials and textual information. Among the kinds of texts, artists' notebooks, studio interviews, technical handbooks and materials science papers in English are frequently used as sources of inspiration. The reading skills that students have learned in College English class will enable them to read and understand this unadapted primary material directly, so there will be no loss of information density due to selective omission or terminological errors in translated works. Parameters of mixed-media formulations in contemporary art, descriptions of programming logic for digital art, and safety operation specifications for some techniques are often only available in English technical documents in professional databases or manufacturer's documentation. If they are illiterate, the creators will have to have someone else interpret the materials and will lose the freedom to choose the material^[3].

In addition to the reading and listening training in college English class, one can also learn about the creative works in videos this way. Most of the materials are in the form of English audio-visual works, such as open lectures organised by foreign art institutions, records of the creative process published by art organisations, and oral logs collected by artists during their residencies. Listening ability is one's ability to gain unstructured knowledge from such sources, as particular information on technology in free speech, thoughts on failed experiments, and other casual stories. These resources usually have more practical knowledge than the official documents, and their value will be underestimated due to a language barrier. If the College English course adds training in listening strategies for art-oriented audiovisual materials, students will be better able to obtain ideas from all kinds of media.

2.2 Construction of Discourse Competence for Art Criticism and Artwork Interpretation

The completion of artistic creation is not the end of the material presentation of the work; it also requires the help of linguistic sign systems to achieve the fixing and dissemination of meaning. Writing training in College English classes can help students organise their thoughts better and thus create works of art, artist statements and exhibition proposals. Such texts have certain rhetorical structures and usually include the specification of the creative background, the explanation of the intention for selecting materials, the mapping of the relationship between formal language and conceptual ideas, and the positioning of the work in the context of contemporary art. Learning the English expressions for these movement sequences will help students present the main ideas of their works clearly to foreign readers in applications for overseas residencies, joint exhibitions and critical reviews of their works.

Discourse competence also refers to the critical reading of and response to existing art criticism. Students should be able to recognise the structure of argumentation, methods of citation and attitudes towards writing in the English art criticism they have read. If the reading module in the College English course introduces genre analysis of art critical texts and trains students to distinguish between descriptive language and evaluative language and recognise the presentation of implicit arguments, then they will have reference models for writing their own critical texts. Discourse competence in the interpretation of artworks is not the extension of translation ability; rather, it is the organisation of one's thoughts according to the norms of English academic discourse. Training in this area needs several rounds of language input and output; it cannot be achieved by learning only a few words or using templates^[4].

2.3 Cultural Negotiation Competence in the International Art Context

The main problem that artistic activities face in the international arena is not a lack of language translation, but rather the various interpretations of artistic concepts, aesthetic ideals and creative ethics in different cultures. College English classes can give students the language skills required to learn about the differences mentioned above. Politeness Strategies, Indirect Speech Acts and Interpretive Frames for Cultural Metaphors are all types of intercultural communication content in the classroom, and they can also be used in artistic situations. When the students need to explain the use of some cultural symbols in their works before the international jury, good English skills will help them proactively set interpretation boundaries and avoid being led astray by the cultural backgrounds of others.

Another trait of cultural negotiation ability is linguistic consciousness of power differences. Not all areas of art are the same, and some languages, publications and institutions have achieved considerable influence over the discourse of exhibitions. Those with weaker English skills are often not allowed to participate in the conference discussions, proposal revisions and cooperative negotiations, and their creative ideas may be changed by collaborators or curators to meet the demands of the main line. If the dialogue and discussion modules in the College English course can simulate real negotiation situations in the art field, such as budget communication, adjustment of curatorial plans and negotiation of creative boundaries, then students will be able to learn how to present their own ideas logically and persuasively under pressure. Students can actively take part in the network of cross-border art production and dissemination, keep their own creativity, and will not be reduced to passive implementers or subjects of translation.

3. The Irreplaceable Value of English Courses in the Art Major Curriculum System

3.1 Differential Influence of Native-language Thinking and Foreign-language Thinking on Artistic Perception

Intuitive perception of symbols in art is an expression of native-language thought. When art students who are native Chinese speakers view works of art, their attention, organisation of knowledge structure and emotional response are often limited by the semantic network and rhetorical tradition of Chinese. Although the above restriction can help to quickly connect the work with local cultural experience, it may also limit the depth of interpretation for artworks created outside of China. Another kind of thought is foreign-language thinking, such as English thinking. The grammar, word classes and metaphors of English are all different from those in Chinese. Tense marking in English requires speakers to be aware of the time when events happen, and the distinction between countable and uncountable nouns affects how we perceive the link between substance and form. Some of the linguistic features students have learned in English can help them notice certain details and other kinds of meaning in works of art that they would not have noticed otherwise.

English classes can help students learn to perceive art in English without having to stop and think in their first language; instead, they will be able to switch between the two language systems cognitively. Given that many studies have been conducted, bilingual learners are more flexible in classifying ambiguous visual information, and this characteristic can also be applied to the process of meaning construction in art. If the College English courses for art majors are only about translation tools or test-taking skills, they will not achieve the goal of cognitive restructuring through language. At the same time, if the curriculum design has led students to compare the different ways in which Chinese and English art criticism texts describe the same work and has made them aware of the shaping effect of linguistic systems on perceptual activities, then students can develop more flexible and reflective artistic judgments in the face of the tension between their native and foreign languages^[5].

3.2 The Synergistic Mechanism of Non-linguistic Sign Systems and Linguistic Sign Systems

The Creation and Reception of Art are both based on many sign systems. Non-linguistic Sign Systems refer to visual symbols, spatial arrangements, sensory impressions of materials, other kinds of sound frequencies, etc., that can be directly perceived. Linguistic sign systems are arbitrary, and abstract meanings are organised according to lexical and syntactic rules on the other hand. The two are not independent of each other, and neither can be left out. At the start of a work, linguistic signs can help to organise one's thoughts and guide the artist in translating an abstract visual idea into a practical construction plan for creation; this aligns with the generative period. Training the language structure in the English course can help students organise their creative ideas logically for writing in English; for example, they can build conditional, causal and contrasting relations among concepts to reduce the ambiguity of expression in non-linguistic sign systems.

Audience comprehension of non-linguistic signs in reception needs to be based on language. In the case of cross-cultural communication, all kinds of artworks may be understood differently by people from different cultures. English is a common language for international art exchange, so it can help to present the information from non-linguistic sign systems in an understandable way. Discourse analysis training in College English can help students learn about the changes in meaning during this conversion process. For example, although "crimson", "scarlet" and "vermillion" are all referring to the same block of red colour in English, they have different shades, degrees of saturation and cultural connotations;

however, the Chinese terms "deep red" and "vermilion" cannot cover all these differences. By learning how to use all kinds of language sign resources, students can better express what they see in their own artworks and exhibition curation writings in words without losing any details present in the non-linguistic sign system.

3.3 Theoretical Basis for the Specificity of English Courses for Art Majors

According to the analysis of the target situation in the theoretical framework of English for Specific Purposes, the specific characteristics of English courses for art majors will be identified. General English courses have set their teaching goals according to the needs of daily communication and general academic reading, but their corpus sources, task types and assessment criteria do not match the language-use situations of art majors. The use of English by art students is often in the form of highly contextualised speech acts, such as defending a work of art, critical discussion or presenting an idea; the linguistic features of these acts include weakening the assertive force, employing conditional expressions and creating virtual discourse spaces. The dialogue patterns and argumentative essay structures in the general English textbooks do not meet the above behavioural needs. Based on the needs analysis, the first step in designing English courses for art majors is to determine all kinds of language tasks that students face in daily life and then decide on a teaching sequence for grammar, vocabulary and other types of discourse.

Another theoretical basis for English courses in art majors is the content-based teaching method of language acquisition theory. Integration of language learning and professional knowledge can extend the scope of students' cognitive development and learning interest. Art students are exposed to English often in their daily lives, such as reading exhibition introductions, writing art reviews and participating in mock juries, so their main goal is to grasp the content rather than learn specific linguistic features. The first way is closer to how children learn their first language naturally. If the College English course is mainly based on general English textbooks, there will be a separation between language forms and professional content; thus, even if students can complete the classroom exercises, they will be unable to use the learned language knowledge in real life. College English courses are necessary for art majors because they can integrate the system of linguistic signs at all times in the process of artistic creation; thus, language becomes a tool for expression and thought in creation rather than an external object to be learned, and a different ecological environment will be created in the curriculum compared to that of art history theory courses and technical courses.

Conclusion

The reason for offering College English classes to art majors is that they have different language demands. The application cases of English for art students are characterised by a high density of terminology, strong context dependence and the need for reflective writing; thus, it is difficult to implement the general English teaching model effectively through transfer. By incorporating training in language skills at all times in the creation of art, specially designed English courses can provide systematic support for the development of talent in the three areas of material acquisition, discourse construction and cultural negotiation. Cognitively speaking, foreign-language thinking offers a different frame of reference for perceiving art compared to that in one's own language, and the combined effect of linguistic and non-linguistic signs shows that English proficiency can be used to anchor meaning. In the future, we will also learn about the particular Design of teaching models for English in the Art major, such as presentation methods for terminological networks, selection criteria for authentic corpora and construction paths of assessment systems. At the same time, we also need to know what kind of English is required in all areas of art so that we can adjust the curriculum content according to a detailed study of these demands.

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