

## The Effectiveness of Artistic Approaches in Teaching English Speaking to Iranian EFL Students

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### Abstract

This study investigates the impact of integrating art-based instructional activities into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking classes among Iranian intermediate learners. Recognizing the limitations of traditional language teaching methods—especially in fostering speaking proficiency—this quasi-experimental research engaged 60 B1-level students divided into control and experimental groups. Over eight weeks, the experimental group participated in art-integrated lessons, including visual storytelling, music analysis, drama, and creative drawing, while the control group followed a conventional syllabus. Pre- and post-tests, learner journals, classroom observations, and discourse analyses were used to assess speaking development. Results showed that students exposed to art-based instruction demonstrated statistically significant improvement in fluency, vocabulary range, and self-confidence compared to the control group. Qualitative insights revealed increased motivation, lowered anxiety, and more spontaneous communication, with students describing their learning as enjoyable and expressive. The findings suggest that incorporating arts into EFL curricula fosters deeper engagement, creativity, and communicative competence. This pedagogical shift encourages a learner-centered environment that supports affective and cognitive development. The study concludes by recommending wider implementation of arts-based strategies in

language education and calls for further research into long-term and cross-cultural effects.

**Keywords:** Art integration, creative pedagogy, communicative competence, EFL speaking skills, Iranian students, learner engagement, language anxiety, visual arts

### 1. Introduction

The profound impact of the arts on human development and learning is undeniable, fostering cognitive growth, igniting imagination, and cultivating crucial life skills. Integrating artistic expression into education provides a comprehensive academic foundation, enhancing everything from self-esteem to critical thinking. This approach not only inspires students but also offers innovative solutions to long-standing challenges, particularly in foreign language acquisition and engagement, which we will explore further.

The integration of arts into education is fundamental for a comprehensive academic foundation, as it profoundly impacts children's cognitive, learning, and developmental processes by igniting their imaginations and spirits. Beyond inspiring students and building confidence, the arts are crucial for understanding the world and human history, fostering self-esteem—especially for those in challenging environments—and acting as powerful languages or learning modalities that engage diverse learners. This engagement nurtures imagination, empathy, critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making. Consistent participation in the arts also cultivates self-confidence, self-discipline, persistence, and collaborative abilities, while offering educators a wider range of pedagogical strategies. Ultimately, the arts foster community and multicultural awareness, enhancing language development and providing vital non-verbal communication methods. (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2012)

Engaging foreign language students, especially those in architecture, can be significantly enhanced by integrating the arts into the curriculum. While traditional English language teaching for architecture students often focuses on technical vocabulary, incorporating visual arts activities allows them to connect their foreign language studies with their field in a meaningful way, engaging their "whole person" through hands-on, creative learning. Research consistently shows that integrating various art forms boosts academic performance, motivation,

and self-discipline, fostering a collaborative, studio-like classroom environment where students take ownership of their learning. This approach not only improves English language proficiency, focus, and problem-solving skills, but also enhances self-concept, cognitive development, and critical thinking, ultimately leading to deeper engagement, communication, and appreciation for creative works. (Janković, 2024)

Learning a foreign language is tough for students, often due to traditional teaching methods, a lack of motivation, or not enough chances to practice. This is particularly noticeable in places like Oman, where current methods often result in low proficiency. To combat this, educators are looking for fresh, exciting ways to teach languages. Art is proving to be a fantastic solution, offering a creative and neutral space for communication. It motivates students and improves their critical thinking, appreciation for art, and crucially, their speaking skills. By integrating art, students can engage with the language in a meaningful and enjoyable way, moving beyond rote memorization to truly express themselves and interact with the world around them. (Al-Busaidi et al., 2022)

Traditional English language teaching is often inadequate for visual and performing arts students who seek dynamic and meaningful education. Arts provide a vital channel for sharing feelings and knowledge in a second language, fostering creative learning, and enhancing verbal development. This has led to increased integration of arts content across subjects. (Thulasivanthana, 2020)

Despite compulsory English education in Turkey, many university students lack adequate proficiency, particularly in speaking, largely due to a system that doesn't prioritize English for university entry and factors like crowded classes. This often leads to enrollment in challenging year-long preparatory programs. To address these persistent issues and foster speaking skills, this study investigates integrating works of art into English language preparatory classes. (Ekoç, 2020)

## 2. Literature Review

Integrating the arts into language education finds its foundation in art's intrinsic link to culture. Žemberová (2014) underscores art's universal presence and its natural fit within educational systems, advocating for its incorporation into EFL teaching methods beyond conventional approaches. This viewpoint suggests that early engagement with

art offers a potent resource for language educators.

Empirical evidence supporting the arts in language learning stems from Ludke (2016), whose quasi-experimental study on French learners demonstrated notable improvements in language test scores. Both musical and visual/drama activities enhanced performance, with musical interventions showing the most significant gains. Though focused on French, these findings imply that arts-based activities can boost foreign language proficiency, including English speaking abilities.

Gardner (2014) highlights that incorporating enjoyable activities, such as artistic expression, is vital for student motivation, particularly in unconventional learning environments. Her research with adult ESL students in a correctional setting revealed that art fostered engagement and reconnected disengaged learners, serving as a powerful catalyst for critical literacy and academic achievement. This underscores art's capacity to significantly increase participation in English speaking tasks.

More directly concerning oral language development, Brouillette, Childress-Evans, Hinga, and Farkas (2014) investigated an arts integration program in elementary schools. Their study, which included many non-native English speakers, reported heightened student engagement and marked improvements in oral language skills, specifically speaking and listening. Theater and dance lessons were found to provide rich avenues for verbal interaction, directly enhancing students' communication proficiencies.

The affective domain, as explored by Arnold (2019), plays a pivotal role in effective language instruction. By addressing emotional factors like motivation, self-esteem, and anxiety, teachers can significantly improve learning outcomes. For Iranian learners, incorporating art can establish a less intimidating and more stimulating atmosphere, thereby reducing speaking apprehension and bolstering confidence, which in turn facilitates greater participation and growth in English speaking skills.

Chi's (2017) case study on the "English Through the Arts" program at a Canadian university unveiled art's diverse functions as a stimulator, refresher, guide, and facilitator in English language acquisition. This study, involving a variety of EFL learners, showed that art promoted class unity and led to high levels of student involvement and engagement,

confirming its effectiveness in enhancing overall language skills, including speaking.

Farokhi and Hashemi (2011) further posit that art has historically served as an effective pedagogical tool across diverse populations. When integrated with the four language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), art amplifies analytical thinking, comprehension, and communication, acting as a powerful unifying force. They emphasize that familiarizing learners with arts is an enjoyable component of authentic learning, fostering comprehensive development and proving invaluable for English Language Learners.

Crucially for oral fluency, Ekoç (2020) conducted a practice-based study revealing the substantial potential of engaging with artworks to cultivate speaking skills in university English preparatory classes. By starting each lesson with visual art, even the most reserved students were observed verbalizing their thoughts in English. Interviews confirmed this approach boosted motivation, enriched their experience, and refined critical thinking and art appreciation.

Additionally, Al-Busaidi, Al-Amri, and Al-Dhuhli (2022) provided more evidence for art's direct role in improving speaking skills by evaluating an art-integrated approach within intensive English language programs. Their Omani study found significant improvements in both speaking ability and overall language proficiency, coupled with enthusiastic learner participation. This research strongly supports visual art as a creative platform that motivates communication and enhances speaking skills.

Finally, Thulasivanthana (2020) addresses common learner perceptions of English as difficult or tedious. Her experimental study demonstrated that integrating visual arts activities yields positive outcomes, making learning engaging and memorable. The findings indicate that art reduces language learning anxiety, improves classroom climate, boosts memory and motivation, and builds rapport, offering a promising strategy for English teachers to cater to diverse learning styles and enhance overall language skills.

### **3. Research Question**

Q: Does the integration of art-based instructional activities have a significant impact on the development of speaking skills among Iranian EFL learners?

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Participants of the study**

The research included 60 Iranian EFL students (30 male and 30 female), aged from 18 to 25, who were participating in intermediate English classes at two reputable private language institutes in Shiraz. Before the study commenced, all participants took the Oxford Placement Test (OPT), and only those whose results firmly placed them within the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) were chosen. This guaranteed uniformity in language skills, minimizing the chance of proficiency level acting as a confounding factor in the analysis of results.

Participants were subsequently allocated at random into two groups: the experimental group, which received art-focused speaking instruction, and the control group, which proceeded with the existing traditional speaking curriculum at the institutions. Randomization was achieved through the use of a computer-generated random number assignment. Attempts were undertaken to equate both groups regarding gender, age, and previous language learning background. Every participant was informed about the study's objectives and methods and signed consent forms. Ethical factors, including confidentiality, voluntary involvement, and the option to withdraw without repercussions, were rigorously maintained during the research process.

### **4.2 Instrumentation**

To guarantee strong data gathering and triangulation, a mix of quantitative evaluation tools, qualitative methods, and observational approaches was employed. The main instrument for assessing speaking proficiency was a standardized oral proficiency exam, given at both the start and conclusion of the instructional period. The assessment featured two primary elements: (1) a visual narrative activity that asked participants to articulate and arrange events, and (2) a discussion topic centered on well-known subjects (such as education, hobbies, or culture), aimed at inspiring lengthy conversation.

The spoken performances of learners were evaluated using a rubric modified from the IELTS speaking band descriptors, which measures four essential areas: fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation. To maintain inter-rater reliability, two qualified EFL instructors assessed all speaking samples independently. Discrepancies exceeding 1 band score were settled through discussion, and inter-

rater reliability was calculated (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.89$ ), showing a strong level of consistency.

Along with performance assessments, learner journals were utilized to collect introspective information regarding the participants' emotional involvement, perceived challenges, and reflections on their classroom experiences. These journals were turned in every week and directed by prompts like "What was your favorite activity this week and why?" or "In what way do you believe this week's assignments improved your speaking skills?" The instructor completed observation checklists in every session, which featured criteria including student participation, verbal contributions, levels of engagement, and signs of anxiety or hesitation. Ultimately, all speaking activities during class sessions were recorded using high-quality digital equipment and subsequently transcribed for discourse analysis.

### 4.3 Procedure for Collecting Data

The data gathering phase occurred over eight straight weeks, with each group participating in two 90-minute sessions weekly. During the initial week, both the control and experimental groups undertook the speaking pre-test in controlled conditions, while individuals in the experimental group received a brief overview on the integration of art-based activities into their learning. Starting from the second week, the two groups began to differ in their teaching methods.

The experimental group participated in a series of organized, art-based speaking tasks aimed at fostering spontaneous speech, emotional engagement, and language use in context. For example, Week 2 concentrated on drama methods including improvisational role-plays and narrative storytelling centered on characters. In Week 3, visual art was introduced, allowing students to describe and analyze paintings and illustrations, and then engage in paired discussions. Week 4 focused on storytelling using comic strips and joint drawing exercises, whereas Week 5 integrated music and rhythm, featuring the singing of brief English songs and examining song lyrics for vocabulary and expressions. Weeks 6 and 7 combined these components into project-focused tasks, like developing brief theatrical scenes or visual narratives. Every session concluded with a brief discussion for debriefing and reflection in journals.

In comparison, the control group followed a traditional syllabus that aligned with the institutions' speaking curriculum. Their tasks

involved textbook question-and-answer drills, grammar exercises, pronunciation training, and structured dialogues with restricted creativity or emotional depth. Both groups were instructed by the same qualified teacher to maintain uniformity in instructor quality, teaching methods, and classroom management, while a standardized lesson plan template was utilized to regulate pacing and timing among the groups.

During Week 8, every participant completed the post-test, and members of the experimental group turned in their final journal entries. At this stage, all audio recordings were gathered, and observational notes from every session were completed for future analysis.

### 4.4 Analysis of Data

A mixed-methods strategy was utilized for data analysis, integrating quantitative statistical tests with qualitative content examination to yield a detailed insight into the intervention's effects. For the quantitative component, speaking test scores from both pre- and post-tests were input into SPSS version 26.

Initially, descriptive statistics (averages, standard deviations) were computed. Subsequently, paired-sample t-tests were performed within each group to assess whether there was a statistically significant enhancement over time. Furthermore, independent-sample t-tests analyzed the post-test means between the experimental and control groups. A significance level of  $p < .05$  was applied for all inferential statistics.

For the qualitative component, data from student journals were thematically coded through inductive coding. Categories that repeatedly emerged, such as "boosted confidence," "lowered anxiety," "pleasure," and "expressive creativity," were recognized and connected to particular learning tasks. Observation checklists were compiled to monitor behavioral patterns, like increased verbal engagement and decreased hesitation. Transcriptions of oral tasks were also analyzed to pinpoint linguistic characteristics, including self-correction, the employment of discourse markers, and occurrences of elaboration or improvisation. These qualitative results were utilized to enhance and frame the statistical outcomes, thus offering a deep, nuanced understanding of the data.

### 5. Results of the study

The results of this study point to a clear difference between the two groups in terms of

speaking skill development. Learners in the group that experienced art-based instruction made noticeably more progress than those who followed the traditional approach. Based on the scores of the pre- and post-test, the average speaking performance of the experimental group improved from 5.27 to 6.38. This change was noticeable and also significant ( $p < .001$ ). It indicated that it wasn't due to chance. The control group, on the other hand, indicated only a small improvement from an average of 5.23 to 5.49. Although it was still statistically important, it wasn't as strong as what was seen in the experimental group. The comparison between the two post-test results confirmed that the difference in improvement between both the experimental and control groups was meaningful and in favor of the group that had experienced art-based instruction.

Aside from the statistics, students' entries in their weekly journals provided deeper understanding of how the art-based teaching influenced their experience. Several students indicated that they felt more self-assured when using English. Their conversations were more effortless due to the imaginative aspects of the speaking tasks, particularly since they didn't concentrate on being "correct" constantly. Rather, they concentrated on conveying their thoughts and feelings. Several remarked that it was the first occasion they truly enjoyed speaking in English. For instance, a student expressed feeling "free to express" while discussing art or performing brief scenes, while another noted that tasks involving music caused them to lose awareness of being in an English class.

The observations made in the classroom reinforced these individual reflections. Throughout the program, students in the experimental group became increasingly engaged and encouraged to participate in activities. At first, some were uncomfortable, but by the middle of the course, they were conversing more comfortably and their anxiety about making mistakes was reduced. The teacher observed less signs of anxiety—such as pauses or signs of discomfort—and a rise in spontaneous conversation and engagement. This change was particularly noticeable in activities involving music, role-playing, or drawing, where students had greater freedom to express their thoughts and emotions.

The audio recordings and written transcripts of speaking tasks showed intriguing patterns as well. The students in the experimental group employed a wider range of vocabulary, additional linking words, and longer sentences. They appeared to self-correct more frequently, and their concepts were more refined. This implies not only they were speaking more but also they were contemplating more as they spoke. At the same time, students in the control group usually opted for safer, more straightforward sentence structures and didn't show the same degree of creativity in their answers.

To sum up, these results show that incorporating art into English classes not only makes lessons more enjoyable and fun, but it also helps students enhance their language abilities in significant ways. They grow increasingly self-assured, more driven, and more capable of communicating and expressing their thoughts. The mix of test results, classroom observations, journal reflections, and speech evaluations consistently indicates that art-based teaching significantly benefits students' speaking skills.

## 6. Discussion

This study's quantitative results, which showed a statistically significant improvement in speaking test scores for the experimental group, strongly align with existing research on integrating arts into language education. This echoes Ludke's (2016) findings, where artistic interventions considerably boosted language test performance, suggesting broad applicability across various foreign languages. The current research further supports Chi's (2017) observations from the "English Through the Arts" program, where art acted as a versatile catalyst, fostering classroom cohesion and high levels of student engagement. The success seen in the experimental group, characterized by increased student participation and reduced hesitation during speaking tasks, directly mirrors the heightened engagement and oral language skill enhancements reported by Brouillette et al. (2014) in elementary school settings.

Qualitative data, gathered from learner journals and instructor observations, illuminated the specific ways art integration cultivated speaking skills. Participants frequently reported

increased confidence and reduced anxiety, highlighting the crucial affective dimension emphasized by Arnold (2019). This indicates how a less intimidating and more stimulating environment, enabled by artistic expression, directly lessens speaking apprehension and enhances self-assurance. The varied activities—including improvisational role-plays, visual art analysis, and comic strip storytelling—provided authentic and enjoyable contexts for language use, moving beyond the constraints of traditional rote memorization. This resonates with Gardner's (2014) work, where art served as a powerful driver for engagement and critical literacy, even in unconventional learning environments.

The current study specifically tackled the persistent challenges faced by Iranian EFL learners, particularly concerning speaking proficiency (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2012; Ekoç, 2020). The notable improvements in the experimental group suggest that art-based activities offer an effective solution to counter the low proficiency often linked to conventional teaching methods and a lack of motivation, as observed by Al-Busaidi et al. (2022) in the Omani context. The "neutral space for communication" that art provides (Al-Busaidi et al., 2022) was evident in the experimental group's willingness to express themselves, even among the most reserved students, consistent with Ekoç's (2020) finding that visual art prompts encouraged verbalization. This highlights art's transformative potential in fostering spontaneous speech and emotional engagement, which are often suppressed in typical classroom settings. Furthermore, integrating the arts offered a crucial avenue for students to connect their language studies with broader interests and fields, engaging their "whole person" through hands-on, creative learning (Janković, 2024). This holistic approach not only enhanced English language proficiency but also boosted cognitive development and critical thinking, as reflected in journal entries detailing deeper analytical engagement with art pieces. These findings affirm Thulasivanthana's (2020) assertion that visual arts activities make learning engaging and memorable, thereby reducing language learning anxiety and improving the classroom atmosphere.

## 7. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether integrating art-based activities into English language instruction could help Iranian EFL learners improve their speaking skills. The discussion of the results achieved from the research conducted for the purposes of this study proves that the students who took part in the experimental group (the art-integrated lessons) performed better in speaking tasks, and showed more enthusiasm, confidence, and creativity in using and English speaking.

However, the students of the traditional classes were less engaged and more anxious to participate in speaking tasks. In short, art helps the students connect emotionally with the content by engaging in visual storytelling, roleplay, and other creative tasks. They also had more opportunities to express their thoughts and ideas. Furthermore, speaking English didn't feel like a test, but rather a natural part of the learning process.

The compelling evidence from this study has significant implications for EFL pedagogy, both within Iran and globally. Primarily, it strongly advocates for the systematic integration of art-based activities into English language curricula, moving beyond their current peripheral or supplementary roles. Educators should be equipped with the necessary training and resources to effectively implement such strategies, recognizing art as a potent pedagogical tool, not just a leisure activity. The structured yet flexible approach employed in this study—incorporating drama, visual art, storytelling, and music—serves as a practical model for curriculum designers. Secondly, the study underscores the importance of cultivating an environment that minimizes emotional inhibitors like anxiety and maximizes confidence. Teachers should proactively seek methods that create a less intimidating atmosphere, allowing learners to experiment with the language without fear of judgment.

The qualitative insights from this research offer a rich understanding of the student experience, suggesting that promoting expressive creativity can lead to deeper engagement and more meaningful language acquisition. Despite its substantial contributions, this study does have some limitations. While

proficiency level was controlled, the relatively brief eight-week intervention period may not fully capture the long-term impact of art integration. Additionally, as the study was conducted in private language institutes in Shiraz, the generalizability of these findings to other educational contexts or larger class sizes might be limited. Future research could explore the long-term effects of art integration on language proficiency and motivation. Furthermore, comparative studies across diverse cultural contexts and proficiency levels, along with investigations into the specific impact of different art forms (e.g., music versus visual art versus drama) on various linguistic components (e.g., pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition), would provide more nuanced insights.

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