

## A Global Citizenship Course- Teaching English through Art

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### **Abstract**

Art history can be a powerful tool for teaching English; however, this tool is still underestimated and underused. Nowadays, young people travel more often to international destinations; therefore, they may be interested in learning about art because they plan to see with their own eyes the artworks discussed during the course.

Art history is a meaningful subject for travellers and even more so when taught in English, which is a lingua franca (i.e., a global means of international communication). Therefore, art courses taught in English favour and enhance the students' acquisition of the English language by leveraging their interest in other cultures.

Here, I present the methods that I use in the Global Citizenship course at Akita Prefectural University, where I teach art history to help my students learn about the cultural backgrounds of other countries. During the course, my students learn how to express their opinion in English and more specifically recognize the meaning of new English words by identifying their Latin or Greek roots. This course helps my students to expand their English vocabulary in addition to learning scientific and technical terms that will be useful for their major.

Teaching art in English can be an effective method to help students acquire and improve their English language proficiency, so it can complement grammar, listening, and conversation courses. At the same time, the subject of art can pique students' interest in the world surrounding them, offering them an opportunity to examine the phenomenon of art from a global perspective. This is why I decided to choose art as the subject of my Global Citizenship course and present it in this article.

Here, I present (1) the course structure, and then elucidate (2) the structure of each lesson, giving two specific examples of materials prepared and distributed in class. This is followed by (3) a section explaining what students can learn from this course, and (4) the conclusions.

### **1. Course Presentation**

This course is meant for a class of around 30 third-year Japanese university students who have a TOEIC score no higher than 550. I currently teach Egyptian, Greek, Roman,

and Japanese art history, as well as mythology in this course (15 lessons, of which one is used for the mid-term exam and one for the final exam).

As the title of this article states, the goal of this course is to teach English through art. However, this is the hidden purpose (as I call it) of this course, in the sense that students will gain much greater knowledge of the English language by studying art as opposed to studying English directly. They are not excessively burdened by the perception of studying English; instead, they learn art history and other related subjects.

Moreover, several of these purposes are perceived by the students (i.e., they are perceived goals). To begin with, students can learn about architecture, mythology, idioms, and figures of speech related to foreign countries. Currently, they do not have many chances to meet people from other cultures because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but previously this issue arose because of lack of money, opportunity, or interest, or simply because at school, students mainly learned about Japanese culture and history. Therefore, this is a good opportunity for them to come into contact with different cultures and mentalities.

Moreover, students can expand their vocabulary by completing the reading assignments about art, which cover a range of contexts. This second goal is also reached through explanations of the origins and the roots of words, so that when they encounter a new word with the same root, they can guess its meaning and accelerate their future reading, reducing their reliance on dictionaries. I do this mainly with words of Latin and Greek origin. This, in turn, leads us to a third goal: the students being able to read and understand scientific papers for their theses. This is because, as we know, scientific language uses many words of Latin and Greek origin. These are the three major goals perceived by the students. There are also other goals, but I will address these below.

## **2. Course Structure**

This course covers five topics, each consisting of two or three lessons.

In the first topic (usually two lessons), I introduce the course and then talk about the meaning of art while going through two readings that explain it. This is followed by a series of questions and answers about art (I shall elaborate on this part in the next chapter, about the structure of a single lesson).

Starting from the second topic, I enter the core of the course by explaining Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Japanese, and Christian art, in this exact order. Each lesson, from topic two to topic five, is comprised of two parts; the first is the most technical part in which architecture, sculpture, and customs are explained to the students. The second part is dedicated to the mythology of the civilization that I explained in the first part.

Students take their exams in the 7th and 15th lessons.

## **3. Lesson Structure: Two Specific Examples**

Let us now proceed to the third chapter, giving two specific examples of lessons.

The first example refers to the introductory lessons about the concept of art, while the second refers to three lessons about Roman architecture and myths. The introductory lessons (1-2 lessons) commence with an explanation and a brief reading

about the meaning of art. After I have completed the reading once, I ask each student to read one paragraph aloud, explaining the meaning of difficult words, using synonyms or Japanese translations. Next, I give them a reading exercise with missing words that they are required to complete by choosing from words written in a box. Here is an example of material handed out in class and consisting of an aesthetic passage.<sup>1</sup>

**How do we study art? Complete the text by choosing the correct word from the box below.**

responses / art criticism / media / to use / aspects / art history / aesthetics / criticizing / context / art production

Art covers a broad spectrum of ideas and expressions. If we are to enjoy them, we must understand its many .....1..... To grasp the various components of art, we can break its study into four branches: aesthetics, history, production, and criticism.

.....2..... is a term that refers to our personal .....3..... to works of art. Each of us has different responses owing to the different individual experiences on which these responses are based.

.....4..... provides the settings and .....5..... for a work of art since objects often reflect the times and culture of the people who produced them.

.....6..... is the actual creation of art. It involves learning to look carefully, knowing how .....7..... the materials you choose, making decisions, interpreting what you see, and .....8..... your own efforts.

.....9..... means explaining and judging a work of art. It is not only discovering how the artist used the .....10..... and tools to create the work, but also trying to guess what the artist might have meant to say in the work.

In the second part of the lesson, a question and answer session starts. I usually ask two questions: 1. Do you like art? 2. How often do you go to exhibitions? These are two key questions, as I clarify in chapter four, to help students expand on their answers.

Regarding the second example, I clearly explain the plan for a lesson about Roman art as it pertains to architecture, which is divided into two parts. The first deals with Roman architecture in general, with the explanation of just one famous Roman monument, and the second part is on Roman mythology.

First, I hand out copies with a general introduction about the topic that I intend to explain. To facilitate comprehension, the text is divided into several short paragraphs (one paragraph = one idea). Let us consider an example.<sup>2</sup> I divided a general introduction to Roman architecture into five paragraphs<sup>3</sup> : the first paragraph provides a very brief introduction to Romans and Roman architectural innovations. The other four are a little more specific and discuss each innovation or improvement (keep in mind that the students' copies have pictures of monuments on them, and for each lesson I prepare a PowerPoint slide that

I project during the lesson so that they can have a definite idea of what I am talking about).

## **ROMAN ARCHITECTURE**

The city of Rome was founded in the year 753 B.C., and at its height the territory under its control covered almost 2,000,000 m<sup>2</sup> (two million square meters) and touched three continents (Europe, Asia, and Africa).

The influence of the Roman Empire can still be seen worldwide in the arts, science, politics, and architecture.

The ancient Romans improved upon many Greek architectural innovations and made huge advances in engineering, sanitation, and technology.

Roman architecture is characterized by a few common components: the arch, the vault, the dome, and the use of concrete.

### **1. Arch**

The Romans improved upon the earlier Etruscan (/i`trʌskən/) arch, using it frequently as a structurally sound, durable, and efficient building technique.

You can see arches put to use here in the Roman aqueduct of the Pont du Gard (France), a series of tubes that transported water.

Many famous Roman buildings, including the Colosseum, used the arch design's impressive load-bearing abilities. Arches are still widely used in architecture today.

### **2. Vault**

Roman architects also used the vault. A vault is similar to a set of long intersecting arches that structurally rely on one another. The ridges and grooves of the Roman vault are clearly visible here in the ruins of the city of Caesarea (Greece).

### **3. Dome**

The Romans also achieved a major feat of engineering when they perfected the dome. The large concrete dome over the Pantheon in Rome stood as the largest dome in the world for more than 1000 years. This large dome is made of molded concrete and features a hole in the center, referred to as an *oculus*. The *oculus* lets in natural light.

### **4. Concrete**

Aside from design innovations, the Romans also made advances in building materials. Concrete had been used for hundreds of years, but the Romans found a way to make it harder by adding the binding agent *pozzolana*, which is volcanic ash. The Romans used concrete for buildings, roads, and even for underwater constructions. This photograph from the city of Caesarea, in Greece, shows the ruins of a building set on an underwater concrete foundation, following the Roman example.

This new harder concrete gave architects much more freedom and it has helped Roman architecture to stand for hundreds of years. This scientific innovation made it possible for generations of architects to study and be inspired by examples of Roman architecture.

After this technical part, I always add a specific reading about a famous monument. In this case, I chose the Colosseum and its origin because it is the most widely known Roman

artwork. This reading is divided into paragraphs. One paragraph concerns the origin of its name, and another is about the cave of marble from which Romans extracted the stone for building the Colosseum and the roads they built to transport the stones. Another paragraph is about the use of concrete to build the Colosseum, and yet another is about the seats in the arena. To these paragraphs, which are interesting because of the technical terms that students can learn, I decided to add another about bathrooms and toilets (with which the Colosseum was equipped) and talk about something funnier that is usually ignored by the textbooks because it was probably considered slightly rude to discuss in class, for instance the existence of "toilet gods" venerated by Romans or the origin of the name of public toilets called "*Vespasians*," named after Emperor Vespasian, who imposed a tax on them. I think this cannot help but pique students' curiosity and they will find the topic intriguing.

Finally, a reading is dedicated to Roman mythology. Last year, I briefed students about the myth of Argo (which explains why the peacock has an eye-shaped motif on its tail). This year, I spoke about the myth of Jupiter and the bee (which reveals how bees got their sting).

#### 4. Earned Knowledge

In the fourth chapter, I clarify what the students are expected to learn from this course, using as examples the two lessons explained in chapter three.

The knowledge they are supposed to acquire varies according to the part of the lesson I explain; therefore, I have divided this series of fifteen lessons into three parts: (1) an introductory part, (2) a technical part, and (3) a narrative part.

##### 4.1. The Introductory Part

The introductory part (1-2 lessons), as we saw previously, entails understanding a brief aesthetic passage followed by a series of questions and answers. To do so, students read a challenging aesthetic passage and attempt to understand sentences with abstract concepts and not just a simple description of an object or a story (I know that this is difficult for them, but I try to push them slightly beyond their comfort zone).

Then, in this part, I ask them two questions: 1. Do you like art? 2. How often do you go to exhibitions?

The answers are almost always: "No, I don't like art," or "I don't go to exhibitions." It is clear that you cannot create dialogue with this kind of answer, and the students will not learn anything from this. Therefore, I give them two options (writing them on the whiteboard) to help them expand their range of answers without them feeling obliged to answer my questions in the affirmative. I concentrated more on expanding the "No, I don't" answer because when I made students raise their hands in response to the question, "Who loves art?" the majority told me that they were not interested in it. Here are some options I gave them. The underlined part is the part I suggested that they could use.

- a. No, I don't like art, I am more into baseball.
- b. No, I am not into art, but I appreciate concerts.

With these two sentences, students speak about an alternative to "I like/I don't like" =

"I am into... / I am not into..., or I appreciate ....." so we have something to work with.  
-c. No, I have never been to an art exhibition, it's not my cup of tea!

Again, here they learn an alternative to "I don't like," which is "It's not my cup of tea" plus the structure "Have you ever been to...?"

-d. No, I have never been to an art exhibition, but I would love to go.

With this example, students learn to express a desire in a more polite way than simply "I want."

Once they have learned the structure "I have never..." I ask them an open question: "Why?" while writing some options on the whiteboard, so that they can use them as models for their answer, for instance: No, I have never been to an art exhibition because I have never had the opportunity to go.

As illustrated in the previous section, the lessons following the introduction are divided into two parts: a more technical part and a narrative one; that is, for example, Greek architecture and Greek myths, Roman architecture, and Roman myths. Now, let us see what each student can learn from these two parts.

## 4.2 The Technical Part

From the technical part, students can learn about the art/architecture history of another country. In the lesson about Roman architecture, they learn to talk about structures such as the vault, the arch, the dome, and so on, in English.

They also learn the names of specific materials like cement, concrete, or binding agents. They may learn geometry-related vocabulary. For example, in the lesson about the pyramids, they learn words like cone, truncated pyramid, triangle, apex, square base, and so on.

This technical part has also a "cloze exercise" exercise in which they are supposed to write the missing words while listening to my explanation (see the reading about Roman architecture). This is important because it stimulates their listening ability (attempting to write the pronunciation of a word they have sometimes never heard before). I usually ask them to tell me the word they have written even if they are unsure about it. Sometimes they are correct. Sometimes they do not know the word but try to answer anyway, saying: "It sounds something like this..." This is, without doubt, a positive sign, because it means that they have made a real effort to understand that word and it is useful to make them reflect upon the difference between the English pronunciation of a word and its spelling. (The cloze exercise also helps them stay focused because they must identify the missing word. It is not just me speaking, but them working).

With regard to this "cloze exercise" part, I would also like to explain the criteria for selecting the missing words. I focus on past tenses of regular or irregular verbs as well as phrasal verbs to make students perform unconscious grammar exercises (e.g.: founded, perfected, improved upon, packed in, soaked in). I choose widely used adjectives and adverbs (e.g.: efficient, widely, harder, sturdy, fancy). I choose nouns related to buildings, construction, and structures (e.g.: tubes or foundations). Then I choose a couple of words that they probably have never heard (e.g., "sound" in the meaning of resistant, or "quarry").

Furthermore, students learn to recognize the root and the origin of a word<sup>4</sup> (a limited number owing to the limited number of hours). For instance, in class I considered the word

"aqueduct." I used this word while explaining the Roman sewerage system. I make students reflect upon the fact that in English, they can use the word "water" as well. As a matter of fact, one can say "waterworks," but English has many words of Greek and Latin origin, of which "aqueduct" is one. Next, I make them think about other words with the root *aqua*, and the first example was "aquarium." I added "aquatic" and "aquaculture," which are useful terms for them because some students research animals and plants. In my opinion, this type of exercise, in which they can find words related by their roots, is useful because it becomes easier for them to memorize any word if they can link it to something with which they are already familiar, so they are better able to relate to it. If they know the root of a word, they can break down complex words into smaller units and fathom their meaning.

In addition, they can learn about figures of speech, expressions, and famous sayings such as, "All roads lead to Rome," or "Rome wasn't built in a day." I then expound on anecdotes about the origin of a saying so that the words contained in it will hopefully stick in their memory. As part of this process, they can learn famous mottos and topical issues related to them. As a case in point, when I told them about the origin of the Olympics, I taught them the Olympic motto: "Faster, higher, stronger" and the fact that it has been recently modified by President of the International Olympic Committee, Thomas Bach, with the addition of the word "together" at the end.

Again, if I find it meaningful, I sometimes tell jokes<sup>5</sup> related to the culture I am talking about at the end of the lesson, to make students revise or reflect upon the background of the culture we have just studied and to ascertain whether they have absorbed the contents of the lesson. It seems trivial or banal, but if they can laugh at a joke about another culture in another language, it means that they have made progress in that language; they have "leveled up." As a case in point, I told them this joke at the end of the lesson about Roman art: "Why don't they sell GPSs in Italy?" "Because all the roads lead to Rome." This is another very well-known saying. It goes without saying that before telling them this joke, I taught them the saying "All roads lead to Rome" during the previous lesson so that they could understand the joke (hopefully). I did the same also for the lessons about Egyptian, Greek, and Christian art.

### **4.3 The Narrative Part**

Finally, I summarize the content that students could learn from the narrative part (the part related to mythology) as six points. The first four points are almost the same as those explained in the technical part, while the last two are peculiar to this part. The first and second points deal with "storytelling." The storytelling part is intended to increase students' curiosity to know the end of the story and therefore lead them to learn and remember new words (necessary to understand the plot). It also helps them deepen their knowledge of another country's cultural background. In this part, students can learn about mythological characters they have just heard about at school in movies or anime. I noticed that they know many names of Greek and Roman gods, and in many cases, they are familiar with both the Greek and Roman name even if they do not know the myths related to each divinity. As for the third point, in the narrative part as well as in the technical part, there is a "cloze exercise" section to enhance their listening ability. After making them watch the



video about the chosen legend once, without subtitles, I give them the script of the story with some missing words to fill in while I tell them the story. Only after having read and understood the script do we watch the video again with English and then Japanese subtitles. Students are free to watch it again at home because I give them the link to the video (I have found TED videos<sup>6</sup> to be a useful source because they usually last no more than three or four minutes, a length that I deemed fair). Apart from explaining the meaning of the words they do not know, I explain, where necessary, a little grammar (just a little because this is not a grammar class). This corresponds to the fourth point. For example, stories are usually told in the past tense, which is one of the obstacles when studying English. In this case, I write on the whiteboard a paradigm for each irregular verb that we have found in the reading, hoping that they will become more familiar with it after having found it in a specific context.

As for the last two points, peculiar to this section, I seek myths with a moral, occasionally explained by idioms, so that the lesson also involves an element of spiritual teaching. To explain this point, I briefly present the example of the myth of Jupiter and the bee. One day the bee, fed up with humans continuing to steal her honey, paid a visit to Jupiter and asked him a favor: to give her a sting to hurt those humans who stole her honey. Jupiter was displeased by her request but anyway gave her a sting to hurt humans. However, if she used her sting, she would inevitably die. The moral of the story? Don't wish for other people to suffer because "Evil wishes, like chickens, come home to roost."

As you can see, an idiom beautifully expresses the moral of the story. Here, the bee is severely punished, and I invite the students to reflect critically upon the fairness of it. This leads to the sixth point.

After telling and explaining the story, I make the students write a very short sentence about what they think, in this case, about the fairness of the punishment. If they are unable to do that in English, I ask them to tell me in Japanese and I write a possible English translation on the whiteboard so that they can learn how to express what they wanted to say in English too. To pinpoint the problem that I want them to reflect upon, I often pose a precise question: for example, in the case of the myth of Jupiter and the bee, I ask directly whether they deem the punishment of the bee to be fair, and why.

## 5. Conclusions

In this article, I briefly examined the content of the Global Citizenship course I conduct at Akita Prefectural University, by illustrating the general structure and analyzing the content of two lessons to demonstrate what the target audience can learn from it. As evident from these examples, they can benefit in several ways. First, the challenge of reading brief aesthetic passages helps them develop their thinking ability and comprehension of abstract concepts in another language; they also learn how to develop longer answers, thus improving their interactions when exchanging ideas. In addition, they acquire meaningful knowledge about art, architecture, and the history of another country. As mentioned above, a cloze exercise helps them improve their listening ability. Moreover, they can learn how to recognize the root and the origin of a word, learn about figures of speech, expressions, and famous sayings, and they can contemplate the cultural background of an entire civilization



through jokes. Finally, they also receive spiritual teaching (which far from being a boring sermon is something lighter and relatable that helps them reflect upon themselves or society) and have the opportunity to create a short sentence in English and to express their point of view in a critical way.

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<sup>1</sup> This passage is taken from Picello, Raffaella, *English through art*, Ulrico Editore S.P.A., Milan, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> As reference on Roman architecture, I mainly consulted the following books: Ferraiuolo, Antonio, *L'architettura Romana*, Passerino Editore, 2020; <https://www.britannica.com/art/Classical-architecture>.

<sup>3</sup> All the underlined words are the missing words that the students must enter while listening to my explanation.

<sup>4</sup> An interesting book that could be used as reference is the following: Retter, Sara, *English: Learning with root words: Learn one Latin-Greek root to learn many words*, UNITEXTO Digital Publishing, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Beard, Mary, *Laughter in ancient Rome: On joking, tickling, and cracking up*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2014. In her book, Professor Beard underlines that what makes cultures laugh explains much about their cultural background and relationship with power. I have found her statement to be absolutely true, which is one of the reasons why I think it is possible to use jokes to bring students close to another culture.

<sup>6</sup> Reference on Egyptian mythology:

[https://www.ted.com/talks/alex\\_gendler\\_the\\_egyptian\\_myth\\_of\\_the\\_death\\_of\\_osiris#t-13417](https://www.ted.com/talks/alex_gendler_the_egyptian_myth_of_the_death_of_osiris#t-13417).

Reference on the Olympic games: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdHHus8IgYA>.

Reference on Greek mythology: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhaepLsP5eg>.

Reference on Roman architecture: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09meiYkTsBo>.