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Exploring Art-Integrated Learning as A Strategy to Foster Students' Behavioral Engagement in  
an EFL classroom

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## Abstract

This paper reports an action research project carried out in a public school in the urban area of El Carmen de Viboral, Antioquia. This project aimed at exploring the impact of an Art-Integrated Learning class in the behavioral engagement of an 8<sup>th</sup> grade class. This project was focused on three aspects of behavioral engagement: Students following instructions, students asking questions, and students contributing to class discussions. For achieving the objective of this projects, different activities mixing both artistic and linguistic tasks were proposed to students. Data collection methods included teacher's journal, questionnaires, memos, and students' artifacts. The analysis of these instruments suggested four findings: Students following instructions and efforts to accomplish the tasks, students asking pertinent questions, students contributing to class discussions, and AIL to generate students' reflections and positive feelings in the EFL classroom.

**Keywords:** Art-Integrated Learning, Behavioral Engagement, Artistic Expressions, Arts, EFL class, following instructions, asking questions, contributing to class discussions.

**Título en Español:** Explorando el aprendizaje integrado al arte como una estrategia para fomentar el involucramiento comportamental de los y las estudiantes en la clase de inglés como lengua extranjera.

### **Degree Requirement**

This action research project is submitted as a requirement of the Bachelor of Education in Foreign Language Teaching (English and French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, in El Carmen de Viboral, Colombia.

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Thirdly, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my practicum classmates, Mauricio Andrés Arroyave, Laura Ospina, and Edson Johan Trujillo, for their support, for sharing their knowledge with me, but most importantly, for their company. Thank you all for making this last year at the University a valuable memory for me.

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## **Preface**

Since I was younger, I always had an affinity with the plastic arts, particularly influenced by my younger cousin, who has had a fascinating talent. By experimenting with different artistic expressions, such as drawing, painting, sculpting, and ceramics, both by empirical and instructional means, I felt the relevance of plastic arts in the construction of my identity. When I decided to study this program, I promised myself to keep cultivating my talent and I finally find myself combining foreign language teaching with art. This research study provided the opportunity to challenge myself and see if teaching of foreign languages through arts, even in a public institution with a group of 38 teenagers, was possible. Subsequently, this action research starts to draw a path for my future as a professional, and it is a proof that working for what you believe, even if hard, it is worthy.



### **Description of the context**

The present section describes the context of the practicum center where I carried out this action research project. Here, I will be describing some characteristics about the institution, the eighth-grade class, and the cooperating teacher. The research took place in a school located in the urban area of El Carmen de Viboral, where students attended school from Monday to Friday from 7:00 am to 1:00 pm. The institution's mission claimed to educate an upright and comprehensive person who always seeks improvement and excellence. Additionally, according to the project "Ser persona", the vision was to educate students about their autonomy, responsibility, initiative, and creativity, appraisal and respect for themselves and others. (Institutional book, 2012)

In this institution, the scholar year was divided into three terms, each composed of fourteen weeks. During the sixth week, the teachers evaluated students' academic and personal/social achievements. For students with low performance, the teachers shared that information with the student's tutors to find a solution. Additionally, in week thirteenth, the institution offered reinforcement activities for those students. Furthermore, each term proposed a problematizing question, a conceptual scope, learning objectives, and three performance indicators: "SER, SABER, HACER" focused on reflecting, learning, and practicing, respectively (Institutional book, 2012). Additionally, for the english courses there were some topics, grammar aspects, and text genres per term to be addressed.

Students from eighth grade attended four hours of english class per week. The group where I did my practicum was composed of thirty-eight students, mostly girls. The ages of the students were between thirteen and sixteen years old. Most of them had a low English level but they were generally very participative. Concerning the cooperating teacher, she had a master's

degree in education. She has been an English teacher for twelve years, seven of which she has worked at the institution. Talking about her methodology, she liked working by projects because she has seen it helps to engage and motivate students in the learning process. She also emphasized that it was very important to her that students not only learn the language, but also become better human beings (Personal Communication, February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023).

The main problems I observed in class were that students got distracted during the explanations and the development of activities by doing other activities, and that the tasks developed during the classes were mainly focused on grammatical aspects. Both problems are co-related, since students did not find appealing enough the activities proposed, either because of the topics or the task they must perform, and then they decided to do something different, such as talking and laughing among them, and using their cellphones.

### **Statement of the problem**

Engagement has always been an issue in english classes, and teachers have been looking for different strategies to try to engage their students in learning. As the reasons for students' disengagement can be various and ambiguous, it is important to be focused on observable aspects. In the following paragraphs I explain three reasons why students were disengaged in the english classes. Students' negative self-perception of their performance, the use of cellphones and conversations among students during class explanations, and the focus on linguistic aspects are the reasons to be described. Finally, I expressed my interest in using artistic expressions to address the above-mentioned issues.

Firstly, students' negative self-perception about their performance was evident in some of my observation journals. Despite the interest they expressed in learning the language, because they considered it important, they did not consider themselves "intelligent enough" to learn it

(Observation #6 excerpt, March 27, 2023). Indeed, during the development of some class activities when students asked for help, I noticed that they were insecure of their knowledge, even when they knew the answers (Observation #2 excerpt, February 20, 2023). This insecurity could result in students' lack of interest in the class in general, driving them to perform other activities during class time, such as usage of cellphones, and having off the topic conversations.

Secondly, during the observation period, the use of cellphones, and the conversations among students during class explanations and activities were recurrent. Concerning the use of cellphones, it became a big issue since the teacher had to appeal to strict measures for trying to regulate their use, such as including a grade for students to avoid using the cellphone in the final grade of the term (Observation #9 excerpt, April 17, 2023), and asking for parent-teacher conferences (Observation #5 excerpt, March 6, 2023). Regarding the conversations among students, it was difficult to state the precise reasons why they used to talk among them, however, it was clear that sometimes these conversations interrupted the class dynamics, especially during explanations (Observation excerpts, February 22, May 3, 2023).

Thirdly, the activities presented to students were mainly focused on linguistic aspects, where they were expected to replicate an anticipated result. While observing, most of the activities that students had to develop were related to verbs conjugation (Observation #13 excerpt, May 15, 2023), and recognition of verbs from video recordings (Observation #4 excerpt, February 27, 2023). These kinds of activities limited students from exploring and expressing themselves, since the words they had to write were already stipulated. Limiting learning foreign languages to the linguistic aspect made students lose motivation and interest in the class, since the students were only repeating. As mentioned by the cooperating teacher, when students do not see the usefulness or necessity of what is taught, they do not feel engaged in learning (Personal

communication, May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

Finally, the decision to propose Art-Integrated Learning for this project was born from an inner interest in combining the teaching of languages with arts. In this case, and following Cuellar-Ayala's work (2019), arts can be useful for trying to solve the above-mentioned issues since it promotes students' self-esteem, where the classroom is a place for social interaction from the recognition of students' own culture, with activities where both body and mind are involved.

### **Theoretical background**

This action research project is based on the concepts of Engagement, Art and Artistic Expressions, and Art-Integrated Learning. In the following paragraphs, I will provide definitions, characteristics, advantages, and challenges of the previously mentioned concepts. At the end, I will explain how the use of artistic expressions and Art-Integrated Learning could enhance students' behavioral engagement.

#### **Engagement**

The concept of engagement is closely related to motivation. In accordance with some authors, motivation refers to those psychological processes that drive people's efforts, whereas engagement is the observable signs of those processes (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Engagement is the active participation of students towards learning tasks and the physical, educational context in a "constructive, enthusiastic, willing, emotionally positive, and cognitive" way (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner, Kindermann, Connell, et al., 2009; Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009, as cited in Skinner & Pitzer, 2012, p. 22).

It is worth considering that engagement is a multidimensional construct not limited to a behavioral dimension of students' relations and interactions within the classroom environment. Reeve (2012) suggests three other dimensions: emotional, cognitive, and the most recent,

agentic. Each facet has characteristics that help to determine whether students are engaged or disengaged. In this study, I will be focused on the behavioral dimension. However, considering that all these facets complement each other, it is important to characterize them.

As claimed by Reeve (2012), we define the emotional dimension as the presence of different emotions that can either facilitate students' performance (such as enthusiasm, and curiosity) or disturb it (such as anxiety, and frustration). The cognitive dimension is defined as the use of sophisticated learning strategies (such as elaboration and planning), the agentic dimension is the proactiveness of students to contribute to the learning process (such as making suggestions or offering input).

Finally, the behavioral dimension of engagement, which can be observable, covers students' willingness towards the class. It can be reflected through their effort to develop activities, persevere in the learning process, and through actions that demonstrate students' attention in class (Skinner et al., 2008), such as asking questions about unclear concepts. The behavioral dimension of engagement is divided into "positive conduct", "involvement in learning and academic tasks", and "participation in school-related activities" (Finn, 1993; Finn et al., 1995; Finn & Rock, 1997; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; as cited in Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 62). Considering the number of aspects that can be studied within behavioral engagement, I decided to focus on three of them: following instructions which entails students' attention and compliance with class commands; asking questions which has to do with clarification of doubts in language and procedures; and contributing to class discussions which is related to students' active participation in meaningful exchanges during the lesson.

It is essential to mention that identifying and interpreting the engagement signs of students is a complex task. The reasons why students disengage vary, and they depend on every

case. As engagement is malleable, we can provide input and try different strategies to see if we can foster those three elements of behavioral engagement. Besides, being aware of students' engagement can enrich the teacher's lesson plans with valuable income to develop strategies appealing to students in their learning process and worthy for teachers in their teaching practice.

### **Art and Artistic Expressions**

Music, dancing, painting, cartoons, among others, are the so-called artistic expressions through which people do art. Each allows human beings to express themselves in a significant and unique way, exploring different aspects of human capacity and perception. In agreement with the Argentinian sociologist Eduardo Grüner (2000), art is communication. The pieces people create carry the author's message to provoke some emotion or thought in the reader. Moreover, it has served to materialize the world of societies, and it has also been used for individuals to understand and mold their own visions of the world. Art emerges to generate alternatives against homogeneity where everybody is supposed to see, feel, and be the same. Even though art by itself does not change the physical world, it has the power to show other possibilities of reality that oppose the supposed established reality, being able to provoke the idea of change in people's thoughts.

In the educational field, the relevance of arts has been recognized to foster learning due to its integral character. According to Cuellar-Ayala (2019), being a process that requires the inspection and the consciousness of the self and the recognition and expression of feelings and emotions, the use of art in the classroom fosters the individual self-esteem, boosting learning due to the augmentation of the motivation and the affective involvement. Furthermore, implementing artistic expressions, such as painting and drawing, "helps students increase their curiosity,

attention, active participation” and “assimilation of knowledge and memorization due to its practical and manipulative nature” (Cuellar-Ayala, 2019, p. 20) (Own translation).

Additionally, learners are asked to go through different cognitive levels of complexity, such as analyzing and interpreting different types of texts, questioning what is given, inquiring themselves and their surroundings, and propose multiple solutions and making decisions (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011).

Furthermore, using artistic expressions keeps the classroom dynamics from remaining the same, making the sessions more motivating for students and teachers. Another research project explained that the students positively reacted to learning after introducing art-based activities in the EFL classroom. In that project, artistic works promoted an environment where students felt free to participate, without the pressure of the grade. Additionally, artistic expressions strengthened students’ confidence, interest, and motivation to learn the target language. (Guerrero Insuasti & Ruíz Calderón, 2019).

### **Art-Integrated Learning**

Arts Integration is a teaching-learning approach that emerged from the Changing Education Through the Arts (CETA hereafter) program by The Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. This program has proposed one definition of the concept and has shared experiences and strategies for those teachers who search for integrating the art as a strategy for improving their classes. The CETA program considers Arts Integration more than implementing handcraft activities in the classroom, but a practice that requires dedication and discipline (Silverstein & Layne, 2010). According to this center, there are three ways to articulate art in the curriculum: Arts as Curriculum, Arts-Enhanced Curriculum, and Arts-Integrated Curriculum (Silverstein & Layne, 2020). This last one is the one I will be developing.

Art-Integrated Learning (AIL hereafter) is an approach intended to teach in, with, and through the arts. Within this approach, by considering arts as a valuable way to explore teaching (in arts), teachers make use of artistic expressions as a material (with arts) and as a task (through arts) to teach any other subject and achieve the objectives stated for the course (Basu, 2020). The use of artistic expressions is an alternative for students to understand better the concepts and knowledge of the subject in the classroom.

This approach follows a constructivist vision, where students can actively participate and reflect on the construction of their learning based on the input provided by the teacher. Among the bases of this approach, we find the recognition of students' previous knowledge, the students' reflection about what they learned and how they learned it, the construction of a safe environment, and the promotion of cooperative learning (Silverstein & Layne, 2010).

Teaching in, through and with arts is a process. Hence, the teacher should serve as a facilitator who guides students to achieve the objectives designed by the curriculum (Basu, 2020). Concerning students' roles, they have an active one. This approach should allow students to develop their voices through various activities that engage them. This approach allows teachers to explore with their students another way to understand the concepts of the subjects. In addition, it helps to develop critical thinking, decision-making, problem solving (Basu, 2020), and the creation of other realities, or, as Grüner stated, the generation of alternatives against the already stated (2000).

Art-Integrated Learning benefits students' learning performance regarding cognitive outcomes, social-emotional skills, and behavioral outcomes. In cognitive outcomes, some studies suggest that the AIL promoted students' abilities in cognitive processes such as reasoning, construction and argumentation of ideas, vocabulary development, and abstraction (Burton et al.,



2000; Baker, 2013 as cited in Zhang, Q., 2022) Regarding social-emotional skills, and following Ruppert's work (2006), AIL provides opportunities to work on "self-confidence, conflict resolution, empathy, and social tolerance" (Ruppert, 2006, as cited in Zhang, Q., 2022, p. 25). Concerning the behavioral outcomes, AIL benefits students' behavior since it can foster students' attention and participation by involving students' minds and bodies, as required in artistic tasks, in the development of the activities (Isenberg et al., 2009, as cited in Zhang, Q., 2022).

As Art-Integrated Learning requires students to go beyond repeating and memorizing, The Kennedy Center suggests following the "creative process" while integrating arts with the subject concerned. The creative process comprises five correlated stages: Imagination, exploration, creation, reflection, and sharing (Silverstein & Layne, 2010). Moreover, as suggested by NCERT (2019), and NCERT (2015), some other steps can be followed while integrating arts with the subject concerned. The Ice-breaking stage is where the teacher catches students' attention and explores their previous knowledge about the topic. Here, the teacher can introduce the lesson by using any art expression related to the topic. The Art integration with the subject topic stage, where the teacher gives the instructions for the activity, and students start creating their crafts. Finally, the reflection stage, where students will reflect on the topic and the activities developed, and the assessment stage, where the teacher will assess students' performance.

With this information in mind, I intend to explore the impact of the Art-Integrated Learning approach on the eighth graders' behavioral engagement within an EFL classroom. The relevance of using AIL for achieving the objectives of this project is the benefits it has in terms of motivation, participation, and attention. Moreover, it involves students' emotions, cognitive,

and critical thinking, which makes learning through arts a complete strategy to foster all dimensions of engagement.

### **Research Question**

To what extent may the use of Art-Integrated Learning approach foster students' behavioral engagement in the EFL classroom?

### **General Objective**

To explore how the use of Art-Integrated Learning Approach foster students' behavioral engagement in an EFL classroom.

### **Specific Objectives**

To analyze how students follow instructions while implementing an Art-Integrated Learning Approach.

To determine the impact of Art-Integrated Learning on the students' willingness to ask questions.

To examine how Art-Integrated Learning promotes students' discussions in the EFL classroom.

### **Action Plan**

To answer the research question stated for this project, five actions were developed from August to October. The topics worked during this project were chosen by students through a survey applied on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023. The first action was the introduction of the first topic, the artistic expression which was painting, and the language focus to describe ins, but also physical appearance and personality. For this purpose, self-portraits were used to practice descriptions and to give students some tools and ideas to create their own artworks. The second action was the development of the activity where students created their self-portraits and their written

descriptions, so then they could apply what they learned in the previous sessions. The third action was the socialization of the self-portraits aiming to share the diverse results emerged in the group, and to identify weaknesses for previous feedback. The fourth action was the reflection on the activity, where students shared their feelings about their processes, and learnings. The fifth action was the introduction of the second topic, the artistic expression; comic strips, and the language focus, which was modal verbs, giving opinions, and vocabulary. Through this, different comic strips were shared, created, and discussed with students.

Data was collected by means of memos, students' artifacts, journals, and questionnaires. The memos were written and codified during the preparation and hands-on stages. Students' artifacts were collected during the feedback stage and were analyzed with the rubric. This rubric was negotiated with students. Journals were written and codified weekly, and the questionnaires were applied twice, one during the reflection stage and the other one during the preparation stage.

### **Development of Actions**

For the analysis of the artifacts and the questionnaires, I was focused on a sample of five students chosen by following a purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002), ensuring that these students were distributed along the classroom and were more likely to provide rich information. During the first action, I introduced the topic, the language aspects, and the artistic expression to develop through image-based activities and collective practice. Throughout the development of the exercises proposed in the introduction, students participated by using the language aspects for describing the different images and self-portraits brought. In the abstract painting activity, they asked questions associated with vocabulary to describe the images they could distinguish. Later, we moved to self-portraits. The first activity with self-portraits was a collaborative task. This

activity aimed to describe the general elements of the painting, the person's physical appearance and personality, and to give the painting a name. When students were deciding on a name, a discussion took place. They provided their reasons why some names were better than others, based on the features of the self-portrait. Along the last activity of the first action, students got into groups to describe some self-portraits they were assigned. Throughout the duration of this activity, students asked questions related to vocabulary. Additionally, they asked questions to corroborate their performance.

During the second action, students started to create their self-portraits. This was intended to give students the chance to apply what they had learned. This action was divided into two moments, the painting section and the writing section. For the painting section, students were designing and executing their ideas for the self-portraits with the elements required. There, students' questions were related to the artistic expression being worked. For the writing section, students wrote their descriptions, and asked questions linked to the linguistic aspects, and to their performance.

During the third action students presented their artworks. I assessed and commented on each presentation with the intention to recognize their work. Students asked questions related to the presentation procedure, pronunciation, and vocabulary. When presentations finished, a general feedback of students' most common mistakes was made to improve their performance.

The fourth action was the reflection stage, where I proposed some questions to talk about students' feelings and reflections on the activity. Some of the students participated sharing their feelings, the aspects they liked the most, and those they did not like from the activity just developed. Additionally, they shared their learnings from the works they fulfilled, and their partners' presentations.

The fifth action was the introduction of the new topic, artistic expression, and language focus. Comic strips were used to provide a space for discussion in the classroom. By using basic expressions to express agreement, disagreement, and provide reasons, students shared their opinions concerning the topics discussed in the comic strips, and their partners had the opportunity to reply. Moreover, students had the chance to practice designing some comic strips, and some of them were shared and discussed with the group.

### **Data Analysis**

In this project, data collected from questionnaires and artifacts was provided by five students who were selected as part of the sample considering their attitudes and eagerness to provide opinions during the observation period. Journals and memos comprise information about the whole group. Information was organized and stored in Google documents and Microsoft word. I analyzed the data using the 5 stages proposed by Burns (1999): assembling the data, coding the data, comparing the data, building interpretations, and reporting the outcomes.

### **Findings and Interpretations**

The purpose of this action research was to explore to what extent Art-Integrated Learning fostered students' behavioral engagement in an EFL classroom by considering three aspects: Students asking questions, students following instructions, and students participating in class discussions. The findings arose from the analysis of journals and memos that included the whole group. Five case participants provided the data from the questionnaires and the artifacts. Analysis revealed four main findings: Students following instructions and their efforts to accomplish the tasks, students asking pertinent questions, students contributing to class discussions, and AIL as a means generate students' reflections and positive feelings in the EFL classroom.

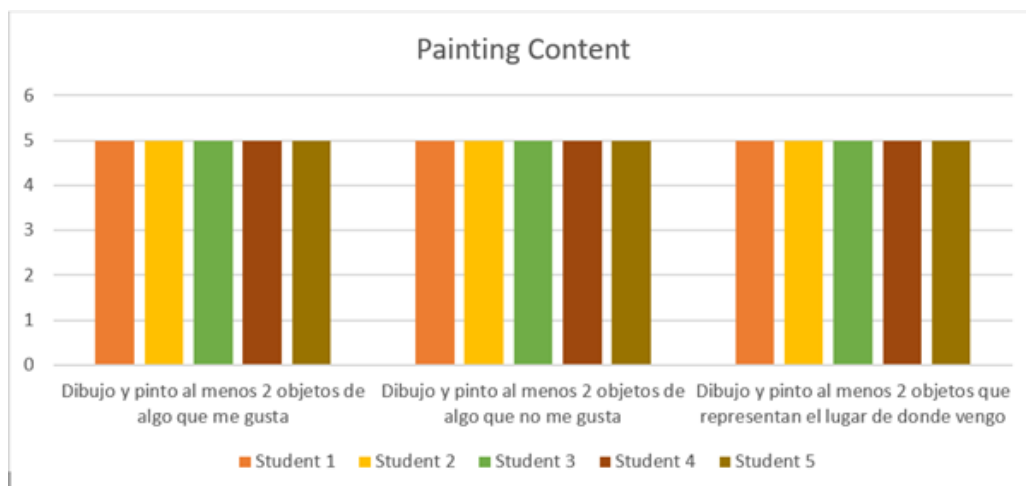
## **Students following instructions and their efforts to accomplish the tasks in an AIL-based EFL class**

Data indicated that students followed the instructions regarding the artistic expressions and the language-focused activities by being attentive to the different elements required to develop the tasks. Data analysis also demonstrated that the instructions and examples were clear enough to develop the tasks.

Concerning the artistic part of the first main task, I observed that students were constantly verifying whether they were accomplishing the items required for the task. To illustrate, during the hands-on stage where students painted their self-portraits: “Some students recounted the elements they had to include in the self-portrait to ensure they were doing well.” “During the activity development, one student asked me for permission to use his cell phone to verify the activity instructions and to check if he had the objects required for the task” (Journal #4, September 4th, 2023).

Additionally, comparing the works presented by the cases and the rubric previously shared with students, data showed that they correctly accomplished the artwork task by including all the elements. Graphic 1 shows that the five cases completed the three required tasks.

### **Graphic 1**



In the following images (Figure 1), we can appreciate the self-portraits created by students.

**Figure 1**

Self-portraits created by students

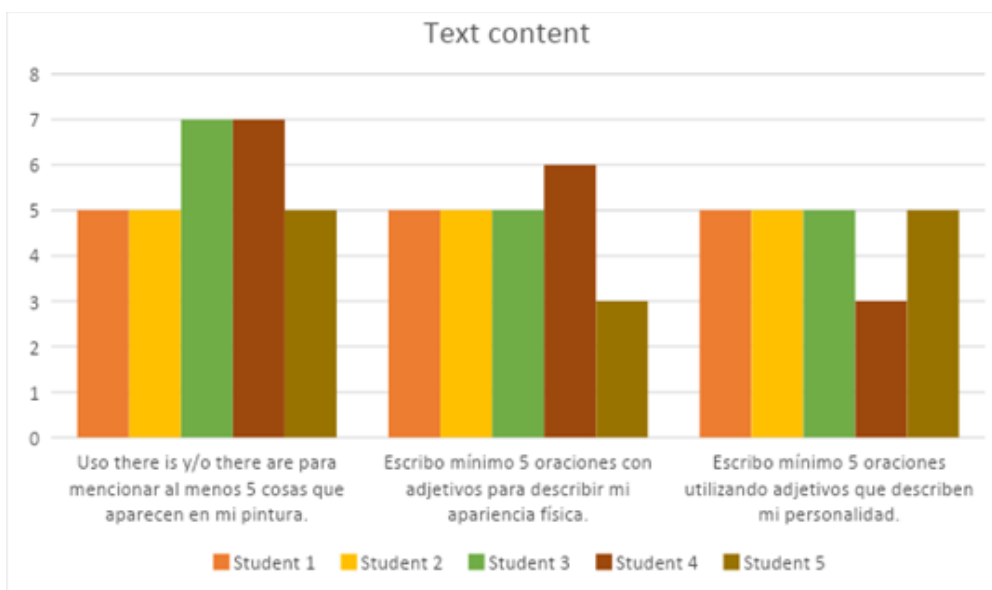


Concerning the written part of the task, where students had to include a certain among sentences by using adjectives for describing their physical appearance and personality, and the use of there is and there are, learners also verified the information they needed to accomplish the

task, being sure that no item would be missing. This took place when students were about to start their oral presentations: “During this time, students were mainly corroborating the information they needed to have, asking for vocabulary and pronunciation” (Journal #6, September 11th, 2023). Evidence showed students were self-checking the process to accomplish the task.

Furthermore, by contrasting the cases’ work with the rubric, the evidence revealed that most students accomplished all the elements required for the task. Looking at the results closely, as shown in graphic 2, it was possible to determine that even some students included more elements in the two first points of the activity. However, for the second and third points of the task, one student missed two elements in each part, as displayed in the graphics.

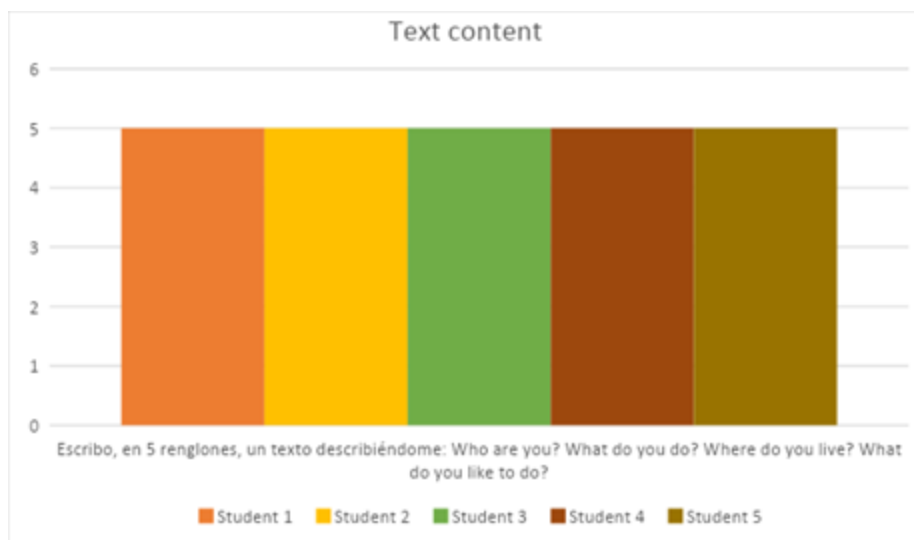
**Graphic 2**



In Graphic 3, we can see that all students accomplished the five items required for the last point of the task.

**Graphic 3**





Journals and questionnaires showed that the instructions and examples provided to students before and during the activities were clear for them to develop the task. From a Likert scale, I asked students from the sample to rate from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest score, the clearness of instructions for the self-portrait task. 4 out of 5 students answered 5, expressing that instructions were clear. One case rated 4 referring that during the explanation of instructions it was difficult to listen well because the case was at the back of the classroom. (Questionnaire #1, applied on September 18th, 2023). Indeed, there were some signs from students that demonstrated such understanding. Some students even complemented the teacher's explanation to their classmates, as follows:

“One student commented that, in her case, she should paint a black river because she was from Rionegro. But then, another student explained to her that the elements I added in my drawing were just an example, and the elements they would include should not necessarily be the same” (Journal #3, August 28th, 2023).

Similar to this evidence, Álvarez Rodríguez (2018) in her research study stated that the use of artworks in the EFL classroom raised “students' self-confidence to reinforce what the

teacher says and present” (p. 65). Moreover, students used some examples given by the teacher as a model to develop their works, as evidenced in the following excerpt:

“I could also notice that the example used in the previous class of how to draw a head was useful for some students since their drawing had the circle and the lines that I suggested to use as a guide” (Journal #4, September 4th, 2023).

Considering the objective of the project related to analyzing the efficacy of an AIL on students’ engagement in an EFL class, it could be evidenced that this approach impacted the aspect of following instructions. With regard to the above information, Álvarez Rodríguez (2018) also manifested in her study that learners “were engaged to follow the pattern or steps to complete their tasks” (p. 65). In conclusion, by developing the self-portrait task, students demonstrated a deep understanding of the instructions and a willingness to follow them.

### **Students asking pertinent questions during an AIL-based EFL class**

Data revealed that an Art-Integrated Learning class drove students to ask pertinent questions according to the activity being developed. This means, according to the purposes of the class, the questions that emerged were tightly connected to them. Students mostly asked questions associated with the instructions of the activities, the linguistic aspects, and the art-based activities.

Students’ questions related to instructions were mainly concerned with the verification of their performance, such as “Profe, ¿Así?” (Memo #8, October 2nd, 2023) and the procedure of the activities “Profe, ¿Tenemos que escribirlas todas (las oraciones)?” (Memo #6, September 20th, 2023). These questions were asked when developing any proposed activities linked to arts or language.

Regarding the questions about the linguistic aspects, three main types of questions emerged: Translation, grammar, and pronunciation. For translation, these questions arose during the linguistic activities, which included writing and oral presentation tasks. As illustrated in the following examples: “¿Cómo se dice dragón?, ¿Cómo se dice lago?, ¿Cómo se dice anochecer?” (Memo #2, August 16th, 2023). “During the exercise with the 2 abstract paintings, the students asked to translate some Spanish words into English. Also, one of them asked for the difference between ‘Earth’ and ‘Land’” (Journal #2, August 16th, 2023).

For grammar, these questions were asked during the linguistic activities when students produced their written texts: “But they started to ask how they do that: Do we have to use NOT? Where do we place it?” “Some other students asked if their writing was grammatically correct” (Journal # 9, September 20th, 2023).

For pronunciation, these questions emerged during the oral presentation sessions, when students were intended to present their works. “Students started asking questions about the oral presentations, (...) if they had to learn the information by heart, (...) and the pronunciation of some words” (Journal #6, September 11th, 2023). “During the oral presentations, some students approached me to ask for the pronunciation of some words” (Journal #7, September 13th, 2023).

Regarding the questions connected with the art-based activities, the main questions concerned color theory, how to draw something, and how to represent something. All of these questions were asked during the self-portrait and comic creation activities. For color theory, students were asking questions such as: “¿Cómo hago café? Este me quedó muy gris”(Memo #5, September 6th, 2023). “¿Cómo hago el color piel?” (Memo #4, September 4th, 2023).

On the one hand, questions related with how to draw something involved more concrete aspects of the artistic process, for example, how to draw visible and tangible objects, such as

trees, water, etc. “¿Cómo puedo dibujar la mitad de una calavera? (Memo #3, August 28th, 2023)”. On the other hand, questions concerned to how to represent something had to do with abstract aspects of the artistic process, such as the representation of non-tangible objects “¿Cómo se dibuja “La fiesta del Cacique”? (Memo #3, August 28th, 2023). “¿Cómo se dibuja una persona amigable?” (Memo #4, September 4th, 2023).

In conclusion, most of the questions asked by students were tightly related to the objectives of the sessions, showing they were aware of the tasks developed which demonstrated students' attention to the class activities and goals. Following Skinner et al., (2008), the behavioral dimension of engagement involves actions that demonstrate their attention to class. In this case, asking pertinent questions for accomplishing the tasks is considered a sign of behavioral engagement.

### **Students contributing to class discussions during an AIL-based EFL class**

Data analysis reported that during the implementation of AIL in EFL classes, the artistic expressions helped to promote discussions in the classroom since students participated, providing their opinions supported by arguments based on pictures or with examples from their life experiences. To illustrate this point the following extract from the journal displays a discussion starter:

“Here, without being the teacher's intention, students started to discuss among themselves, giving their reasons why the best name for the picture was \*\*\* and not the others. One of the comments was that doubled-faced was not a good name because there were more than two faces in the image” (Journal #2, August 16th, 2023).

In another session, the teacher asked the following question based on a comic and a discussion was also triggered:

“Do you think dogs must be on a leash? Some students agreed, and some students disagreed. Among those students who agreed, some said they agreed because if dogs are not on a leash, they could get dirty or be run over by a car. So, it was more of a preventive measure. After these comments, many students said it depended on the dog because some dogs were very well-behaved, and if the problem was because they got dirty, they could just clean the pet. One of the students shared an example. She said that she had a small dog. It was like a little pig but very quick-witted, and it never let cars run over it. Another student said that she had 2 big dogs and that they were very well-behaved” (Journal #11, October 2nd, 2023).

Following Farokhi and Hashemi (2011), different artistic expressions in the learning environment demands students to use complex cognitive skills, such as interpreting various types of texts, questioning themselves and their surroundings, and propose multiple solutions and making decisions. As in the excerpts shown, students employed different cognitive abilities to participate and support their ideas within the class discussions.

In the questionnaire students expressed the reasons why they participated in the discussions, and whether the topics presented were important to promote them. Evidence of this assertion is presented in the next extract: “La creatividad de la profesora haciendo los diferentes temas de discusión.” “Los temas que hemos trabajado porque son concurrentes a que los compañeros participen y nosotros respondamos” (Questionnaire #2, applied on October 18th, 2023).

Furthermore, students shared their opinions about the usefulness of comic strips in promoting discussions. Students mentioned that classmates' views on the topics in the comic strips motivated the discussions. “Si, porque ahorita estabamos hablando y algunos veían los

dibujos de forma diferente” (Questionnaire #2, applied on October 18th, 2023). Also, one student answered: “Sí, al tener imágenes aparte de lo escrito se entiende mucho mejor de lo que se trata y se pueden hacer las observaciones en base a eso.” (Questionnaire #2, applied on October 18th, 2023).

Artistic expressions helped to motivate students to participate in discussions because they contained topics relevant to their daily lives. Additionally, visual aids helped learners to find more meaningful connections, which led to more active participation in discussions.

### **AIL as a means to generate students’ reflections and positive feelings in the EFL classroom**

AIL activities in the English class motivated students to reflect on what they had learned from the activity and on themselves. Additionally, AIL promoted positive feelings during the process. Arts allowed students to recognize themselves since it is a personal practice. Thus, students represented the realities familiar to them in a particular manner. In that way, the reflections and feelings emerging from these processes were also unique. To illustrate this finding, some students answered the question during the reflection stage: “¿Qué tiene que ver este ejercicio con la diversidad cultural?” “Incluso si todos venimos del mismo lugar, no todos lo representamos igual.” “Porque pintamos cosas de nuestra cultura, como la cerámica.” “Porque aunque muchos aquí son de la misma parte, del Carmen, también hay otros que somos de otras partes.” (Journal #8, September 18th, 2023).

Moreover, some reflections from the case students were more related to their individuality. To the question “¿Qué tipo de preguntas te surgieron mientras realizabas la actividad?” students answered: “Me interese [*sic*] mas por el lugar de donde vengo ya que no lo recuerdo muy bien.” “Me cuestione [*sic*] a mi misma, me di cuenta de muchas cosas lindas

sobre mi, me cuestioné [*sic*] también sobre mi vida.” (Questionnaire 1, applied on September 18th, 2023).

“Quizas fue lo que no me gusta, creo que no hay nada que no me guste como tal, como interpretar los puntos que estaban en la actividad como del lugar de donde vienes.”

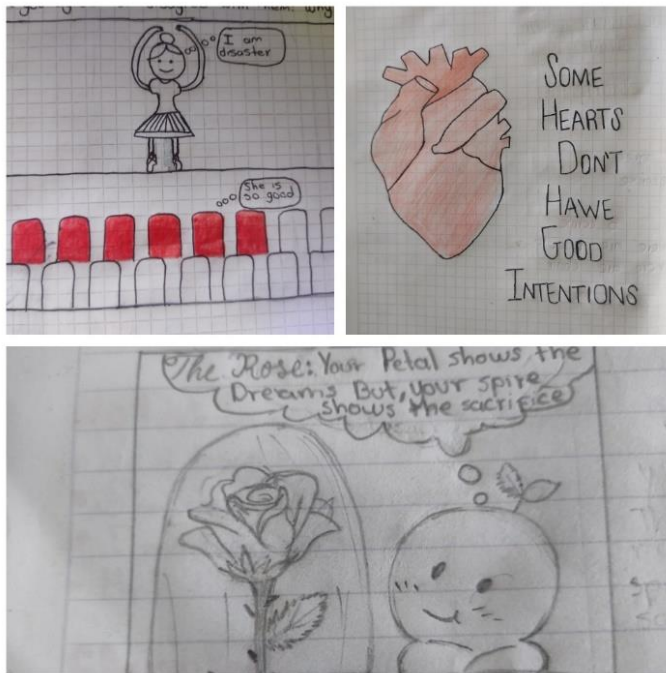
(Questionnaire 1, applied on September 18th, 2023).

Indeed, to the next question “¿Sientes que hubo solución a las preguntas que te surgieron? ¿Por qué?”, students answered: “Si, por que pude investigar y preguntarle a mis padres.” “Si, en la actividad me fui solucionando cada duda que tenía sobre mi.” “Se aclararon muchas cosas sobre si mismo y sobre los compañeros aunque creo que hay cosas que no tienen respuesta o por lo menos por ahora.” (Questionnaire 1, applied on September 18th, 2023).

Additionally, art-based activities provided students with the opportunity to express themselves by using the language, as exposed in the comic strips they developed in class with an open theme:

## **Figure 2**

*Some comic strips developed in class*



Moreover, in the second main task, where students created in groups comic strips related to the topic of love and lack of love, many of the artworks represented couples with a troubling ending, such as break ups after having a relationship, women abandoned and pregnant and unrequited love. However, some other comic strips also represented types of love different to the romantic one, such as the filial love.

**Figure 3**

*Comic strip representing love.*





**Figure 4**

*Comic strip representing love.*



**Figure 5**

*Comic strip representing love.*



These comics strips can mean a representation of students' common real-life situations around them. Following López (2004), Art reflects the inner patterns of society and helps to develop "the personal expression and communication with oneself and the others" (p. 3) (Own translation).

Implementing AIL in the english class could engage students by promoting positive feelings and was a tool to represent their realities. From data analysis, it was possible to conclude that AIL made some students feel engaged with the class, facilitating learners' performance. Additionally, this analysis corroborated the helpfulness of arts to portray their backgrounds and contexts. Students were more involved in developing the artistic and linguistic processes, and arts proved to help enhance their behavioral engagement.

### Conclusions and Implications

This action research intended to explore how the use of Art-Integrated Learning fostered students' behavioral engagement in an EFL class. Considering the data gathered and its

correspondent analysis, I concluded that the implementation of the AIL approach, through different artistic expressions such as painting and drawing, could help to enhance the behavioral engagement of a particular EFL classroom in terms of three specific aspects, which were following instructions, asking questions, and contributing to class discussions. Furthermore, AIL promoted reflections, and positive feelings, which are important to engage students in any class.

Nonetheless, this action-research project encompassed some challenges for those teachers who aim to integrate arts within an EFL classroom. Planning AIL classes in the EFL classroom requires time and commitment, especially when the intention of the teacher is trying to provide students with a diversity of activities and materials, including non-hegemonic artists in the classes. Additionally, it is important to consider students' interests for guiding the english classes, having the possibility to propose more appealing classes for them.

Something that is very important to consider is the quantity of students in a classroom, the time your students will spend in class by developing the activities, the materials they will need and how accessible they are for students, and the physical space they dispose to create the artworks. Each of these factors can either facilitate or even make impossible the implementation of any artistic project.

For further research, it would be enriching to explore deeper the impact of using AIL in the english classroom to impact other aspects of the students' capacities such as their critical thinking, the recognition and expression of feelings, and the impact on social interaction and empathy, since artistic expressions have the potential to show students different realities, give them the possibility to propose a new one, and socialize them.

## Reflection

I remember that, when I started this program, I went to the presentations of the projects of some students who were about to graduate. I was amazed about their confidence while explaining, even if I barely understood what they said, and wondered if I was going to be like that one day. And here I am.

When I started the practicum, I felt very nervous about my capacities concerning my proficiency in the language, my strategies to teach it, and my abilities in classroom management. I was worried about the “success” of my proposal, and the students' reactions towards the proposal and the classes themselves. Fortunately, during the process, all my fears disappeared, and thanks to my cooperating teacher and my students, my confidence grew, and the development of the classes was very enjoyable.

From this experience I learned how gratifying it is to teach by using artistic expressions. Even if planning and searching for materials was, sometimes, stressful because it was very difficult to find the materials I wanted to use, after implementing and seeing students' works and reactions, it was worth it. Moreover, I felt very happy sharing with students not only what I know about the language, but also some of the knowledge I have concerning arts, which make a very important part of me.

Another learning I highlight from this experience is not to feel frustrated or intimidated for long silence spaces or, on the contrary, for those moments where students are very loud talking among themselves. I learned that the classroom is a space where many things can happen, as being a place where students socialize among them, silences and noisy moments make part of their dynamics. However, it is important to try different strategies to keep the flow of the class going.

Something I reinforced from practices was the importance of asking, considering, and including students' interests in the lessons. Thanks to some comments that they made in the evaluation of the classes, I realized how significant it was for them to take them into account before planning.

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