

# Monet, Renoir, and Tomoko too: Activities using impressionist artwork to aid self-expression

Marlen Harrison

*Indiana University of Pennsylvania*

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このレッスンは創造的のためのターゲット構造をもたらす有名なイメージの議論によるself-expression (映像の推測印象派の芸術家による反射)。レッスンの目的は学生のためにであるそれらが報告するようにする用語および基本的な構文を学びなさい思考そして感じはと同様、他からのそれらを引き出す。その上に、それは創造的な表現そして実験のための出発点とのである自治ことばによる表現。

“Impression” may be defined as an effect, feeling, or image retained as a consequence of experience (TheFreeDictionary.com, 2005). Introducing the imaginative and famous images of impressionist painters can help students understand how their own creativity may be applied to the English language to talk about their own experiences. Beare (2006) writes:

As is the case with personal photographs, the use of paintings and photographs helps to introduce vocabulary and interpretive skills into the classroom while engaging the students on a visual level. The amount of imagination required to interpret paintings and photographs guarantees effective learning. Students are forced to make new connections that are out of the ordinary. In fact, I especially enjoy using modern paintings as students are forced to interpret the paintings and really push their linguistic envelope.

How many times have we asked students questions only to be met with responses that could be more emotional and personalized? Perhaps part of the reason for this is the simple fact that most students lack the

language tools required for such self-expression. If the great impressionists used color, brushstroke, and paint as tools to express their thoughts and feelings about the world around them, then it seems that students of foreign languages are performing quite a similar task with words, sounds, and body language as their tools.

The use of artwork as a tool for language learning has become so popular as of late that a number of museums, such as the Getty Museum of California, the National Gallery in London, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, have started outreach programs offering lesson plans and programs for ESL teachers, using paintings and sculpture from their collections to help students practice English ([www.getty.edu](http://www.getty.edu); [www.nationalgallery.org.uk](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk); [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)). Other museums are collaborating with local schools and universities, such as the Chrysler Museum of Virginia in conjunction with Tidewater Community College's ESL/EFL programs for foreign students ([www.chrysler.org](http://www.chrysler.org)), in an attempt to enhance the language learning process. Pegrum (2000) writes:

At lower levels, students might be asked to find items, names or dates, or to respond to art in a simple way, eg. by ranking paintings in order of age or personal preference, or even just identifying the subject of paintings listed on a worksheet. At higher levels students could go on a guided tour -- one activity very popular with exam students I taught in Australia involved a tour of the Aboriginal art collections in the Art Gallery of Western Australia -- and could be encouraged to ask questions of the tour guide. Many museums (eg. The Tower Bridge

Museum in London, Dynamic Earth in Edinburgh) provide worksheets for completion on the spot and in follow-up sessions, or alternatively these can be made up by the teacher; such visits can also give rise to follow-up class discussions or report-writing.

For students of foreign languages, the study of art, image and sculpture can provide an interesting and surprising arena for not only practicing language skills, but learning about culture and history as well.

The following outlines an activity created by the author that has been used in both small group and larger university settings, designed to help students express themselves. For this activity, students should have experience with basic self-expression and sentence structure, and be at a level of high beginner or stronger. I've used impressionist paintings such as Seurat's famous "A Sunday on La Grand Jatte" or Van Gogh's "The Starry Night", but many other impressionist images may be downloaded from the internet; one of my favorite sites is the National Gallery's (USA) <http://www.nga.gov>.

This activity requires approximately 30-45 minutes. The aim is to introduce students to the concept that language, like an impressionist painting, can be a creative and interpretive act, used to express emotions and ideas. Students practice self-expression, dialog and conversation, and depending upon the extension activities, may also explore idioms, comparisons, metaphors, etc.

## Getting ready

Begin with an explanation of the lesson, “Today we will practice talking about our ideas and feelings and look at famous paintings.” I then employ a timed warm-up (approx. 5 minutes) asking students to inquire about each other’s favorite artists and why they like them. This simple warm-up gets students talking and prepares them to view artistic images. A sample conversation that may be pre-taught could include:

A: Who is your favorite artist?  
 B: I like \_\_(painter’s name)\_\_, how about you?  
 A: Ummm, I like \_\_(painter’s name)\_\_. / Ummm, I can’t think of the painter’s name.

### Figure 1. Warm-up

It is helpful to also spend about 5 minutes eliciting ideas about the words “impression” and “impressionists.” At least one student is usually familiar with the genre of impressionist painting and can name one or two artists. For lower level groups, I allow volunteers to write their explanations on a chalkboard or OHP in Japanese. Students can also build their vocabulary by reviewing such phrases as “first impression,” “bad impression,” etc.

Appendix 1 is a list of words that students can use for a dictionary/translation exercise to help build their vocabulary for later stages of this activity. One of my favorite dictionary exercises is a contest where students see who can find the

Japanese word the fastest. I ask students to work in pairs, review the words, and to use a dictionary to help them with any words that are unfamiliar.

Next, ask students, why would a lesson about impressionist painters be good for an English conversation lesson? As a timed (5-minute) brainstorming task, students should work together in a small group and think of at least three possibilities. After students share their ideas - if in a classroom, I choose a few students and ask them to write their responses on the board; depending on the level, I allow students to explain in their native language — past responses have included “vocabulary,” “many colors,” and “fun thing for talking”— explain that foreign language students are impressionist speakers who, like the impressionist painters, must use a set of tools to create an image that expresses how they feel. Finally, review the target structures by providing sample dialogs that can be used when discussing not only art but most any topic. For example:

Q: Do you like it?  
 A: I like/ dislike it because...

Q: What does this remind you of?  
 A: This reminds me of...

Q: How does this make you feel?  
 A: This makes me feel....

### Figure 2. Sample dialogs

## Picture speculation exercise

Show images (one at a time) of impressionist paintings such as Seurat’s “A Sunday on La Grand Jatte” or Van Gogh’s

“The Starry Night.” Model the procedure by having a student ask the above sample questions and providing appropriate responses. I ask students to “use their imagination” and to think of creative responses that reflect their own impressions using the sample sentences from above. The remainder of the activity may be spent encouraging student interaction. A brief restatement of lesson goals and a summary of lesson activities by the instructor are recommended.

It is important for the instructor to remember to provide concrete examples of language targeted, apply these kinds of tasks only when appropriate to the students’ needs and skill levels, and choose images that are appropriate to the professional classroom environment. Additionally, the instructor’s primary role is to help the students determine the direction of the lesson, depending upon their particular language abilities and needs, and provide concrete examples. Regardless of the outcome, students have a chance to converse, build vocabulary, practice sentence structure, and most importantly, increase their abilities as impressionist speakers.

### Variations

There are many possible approaches to using artwork in a language lesson. Photographs, drawings, or paintings of any genre may offer students a chance to enter into conversation and express themselves. Many forms of language may be emphasized, for example:

- Metaphors or similes – Q: “How does she look?”  
A: “She looks as happy as a bride.”
- Comparisons – Q: “Which painting do you like better?” A: “I like X better than Y because...”

- Vocabulary – “Name as many adjectives/adverbs/verbs for this image as you can think of.”
- Action speculation - “What happened before this point in time?” or “What will happen next?”
- Title speculation – “What would be a good title for this image?”
- Poetry – Each student provides a single sentence about the image and the students arrange the sentences into a meaningful order and create a title.

In addition to imagery, these activities may be applied to any form of media. I’ve successfully carried out similar activities while listening to music. For an additional list of classroom discussion questions related to art, ITESLJ.org has a great list for use at <http://iteslj.org/questions/art.html>.

### Assessment

The lesson is most successful when the instructor limits correction of vocabulary or grammar and encourages creative experimentation with language. There are many possibilities for assessment at the instructor’s discretion such as a follow-up conversation task or written quiz. As a way to assess my students’ abilities to use the target structures, I had my students attend an exhibition of our school’s photography club and practice the above dialogs in a realistic setting. They were asked to write their dialogs as they spoke and then exchanged these with classmates for peer review.

## Discussion

This lesson has a variety of outcomes: Students may create sentences or stories similar to poetry; students may issue opinions about the artists' intentions or abilities; and often students will express their dislike or approval of the images. Using the model question and answer formats, students frequently have entered into brief conversations that have resulted in surprising and imaginative speculations. In response to Van Gogh's "Starry Night" one first-year non-English major responded:

"This reminds me of winter-time in Hokkaido... my grandmother's place. Sometimes star is bright and shiny. Cold feelings can be happy."

Another student offered the following upon viewing Cassat's "The Boating Party":

"On a beautiful afternoon a family sails far from their trouble. This painting makes me feel love and I wish to have this experience too."

A group of students created the following poem, also reflecting on The Boating Party:

Sunday

Sunday is the day for family.

Green water and green trees, everything green.

Baby sleeps in mother's arms.

Peaceful Sunday.

Additionally, students should be encouraged to keep a list of all new words learned during the exercise and to practice

using them during their conversations. This format has endless possibilities and is a great way to encourage students (with only a little help from the instructor) to practice newly learned vocabulary or grammatical structures.

Application and extension activities have included using the practiced conversations to discuss a variety of media. Most recently, the activity has been followed by a visit to the university photography club exhibition, where students tested what they had learned by working with a partner and creating a conversation discussing a chosen photograph. In subsequent classes, students used the model conversations to also discuss their feelings about music and film.

How this format compares to other methods of practicing conversation and expression has not been explored as of yet, but would be an interesting extension of this project for future study. For example, does the use of creative media itself affect the attitude of the student and their ability to learn a target structure? Moreover, direct feedback from students would be useful in exploring how this approach compares to other approaches such as role play and pair dialogs. At the end of the school year when given questionnaires about the most useful/interesting activities completed as part of my coursework, the impressionism activity repeatedly earned praise from the students due to the focus on group collaboration and emphasis on conversation and expression.

## Conclusion

As Rucinski-Hatch writes:

Paintings can evoke powerful feelings that can later be expressed in language! Our students may come to us empty of English but certainly not empty of wisdom, intelligence and life. This contemplation of great paintings can provide them with an outlet to express all that they have to say. (1995)

The above activity describes an approach to incorporating impressionist images into a lesson practicing self-expression, an approach now widely applied in museums and galleries around the world with specific ESL/EFL curricula.

Though a formal experimental study of the efficacy of this approach to conversation and expression has not yet been undertaken, feedback from both students and teachers (those who attended the presentation at the JALT 2005 national conference in Shizuoka) has been largely positive and enthusiastic. It is the hopes of this writer that such an activity will both stimulate creative thinking of both teachers and students, and enhance student recognition that as second language speakers, they have the freedom and ability to use language as a tool to share their own impressions of the world.

**Marlen Harrison** holds an MA in Education and Human Development from the George Washington University and is currently pursuing his doctoral studies in English Composition and TESOL at Pennsylvania's IUP. Marlen is the co-coordinator of JALT's Learner Development special interest group and his personal research interests include

email exchange projects, alternative approaches to testing and assessment, and project-based learning.

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## Appendix 1

### Vocabulary list for Impressionists exercise

An Impression	A Painter	An Idea
Impressionist	To remind one of	A Brushstroke
An Image	To feel (an emotion)	To Create
Tools	Feelings	Creative
Favorite	A Speaker	Art
A Painting	An Artist	Imagination
Nostalgic	Inspired	Relaxed

Melancholy	Cheerful	Complicated
Moody	A Composition	A Background
A Foreground	A Landscape	A Portrait
A Still Life	A Figure	A Canvas