Power of the Integration of the Arts
in the Language Classroom

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to determine the contextual elements that contribute to a successful experience evidenced by both research and practice cultures as a result of the integration of music and other art forms into a third grade French first language curriculum. In addition, since this study was ventured in a francophone minority community, it was deemed necessary to examine if the interdisciplinary music/arts/language teaching had an impact on cultural awareness. The data revealed that the students learned in French, music and other art forms and there was a change in their motivation to learn and speak French in their daily lives. Furthermore, the activities and pedagogical strategies utilized during the interventions, in addition with several non-academic benefits, contributed to the success of this interdisciplinary experience.

Introduction
Desks are pushed back of the classroom and a large flip chart holding a page on which is written a seven-stance poem is placed in front of the blackboard. Third grade French students are teamed up into small groups dispersed around the room. One group is working on dance movements, another on musical instruments or on a drama production while the last group is drawing and painting a large mural. All students are engaged in their task discussing and making compromises with their team mates while the classroom teacher goes from one group to the other asking the students to share the rationale behind their creative choices. After a short while, the classroom teacher brings the students together for the mega-performance. The energy in the room is exhilarating! Applause, spontaneous cries, and positive feedback are heard throughout the room. Desks eventually return to their normal U-shaped display for a reflective analysis/criticism of the “happening”.

Can we describe this setting as a successful learning environment? Are the students meeting the learning objectives set by the language arts and arts curriculum? Above all, are the students acquiring knowledge and skills needed to face some of the demands of the 21st century, that include citizens that are able to think and that have a passion for creative endeavours (Posner, 2002)?

Background
Questions surrounding the issues of how do students learn best and how do we teach so that we capitalize on the most effective ways to learn have been haunting educators for many decades. Many believe that students should be active learners involved in meaningful tasks that are set in real-life contexts (Drake, 1998). Caine and Caine (1997) add that it is crucial to offer the right experiences to our students at the right time and that these experiences be connected in meaningful ways because this is how the brain processes information to make sense of our world. These authors acknowledge that the more connections we make to previous knowledge and to previous experiences, the more we learn and apply our learning. In fact, many educators believe that interdisciplinary curriculum supports the claim that all knowledge is interrelated and helps teachers deal with the inherent complexity of the world (Martin-Kniep, Fiege, Scoodak, 1995). Erickson (2002) goes a step further saying that the goal of integrated curriculum is “integrated learning and thinking” that is, “seeing the patterns and connections of knowledge at a conceptual and transferable level of understanding” (p. 106). She adds that students, though the learning process, develop a “habit” of integrating information received from the senses and that the ability of integrate will have a direct impact on their performance in dealing with the complexity of contemporary worldwide issues.

A preliminary body of evidence is beginning to accumulate on the results of integrated programs for students. Vars (1995, 1996), after reviewing more that 100 studies that took place between 1956 and 1995, cautiously concludes that students in integrated programs do as well, and often better, than
students in conventional programs. Nevertheless, Vars (1996) confirms that, thus far, there have not been enough studies to identify whether integrated approaches produce superior results. For example, some of the research undertaken on the integration of the arts into the core curriculum has shown that the arts stimulate both learning and the ability to learn (Grimmestad, 1982; Lowe, 1998a, 2000, 2002a, 2002b; Pirie & Opuni, 1992; Royal Conservatory of Music, 1994; Upitis, R, Smithrim, K., Patteson, A., & Mebane, M., 2001). However, it is important to note that most of these studies have emphasized the benefits of the integrated arts approach more than a cause and effect learning relationship between the arts and certain subject areas.

The study

Setting

The participants of this study were a class of Grade 3 French students from Amirault Elementary School situated in Dieppe, NB, Canada. The demographics consist of a population of 65% English speaking and 35% French speaking individuals. The French, who live in this region where English is the majority language, are faced, as are other minorities in similar settings, with problems concerning the safeguard of their language and their culture. Although many attempts have been made by the government of Canada and by the province of New-Brunswick to ensure services in both official languages (English and French), a great number of the native French population has been assimilated to the language of the majority due to many factors such as mixed marriages, cultural values, and American influences through the media (Landry & Rousselle, 2003). Consequently, French language educators are constantly challenged to find pedagogical strategies that will foster cultural identity and a feeling of belonging to the French community while assuring effective learning of French through activities that are significant and interesting for the learner.

Several educators who are concerned with cultural and linguistic vitality in a minority setting have identified classroom practices such as musical, visual art, and theatrical activities integrated into the language classroom that have had an effect on cultural identity (Duffy & Duffy, 1997; Lowe, 2002a, 2002b; McCluskey, 1992; Nichols & Honig, 1997; Suthers & Larkin, 1997). Nevertheless, very little research has shown the effectiveness of the integration of the arts into the language curriculum in a French minority setting.

Purpose

Supported by positive results of research undertaken on the integration of music and other art forms into the language curriculum (Failoni, 1994; Kite, Smucker, Steiner, & Bayne, 1994; Lowe, 1997a, 1997b, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 2000, 2002a, 2002b), the main questions of this study were developed with the inherent concern to investigate whether trends could be identified. Four questions guided the data collection:

1. What are the contextual elements that contributed to the strength of the arts/language interdisciplinary experience?
2. What musical, artistic, and academic benefits do the students receive?
3. Will the integrated arts/language pedagogical strategies promote learning in the arts and in French?
4. Since this study will be undertaken in a French minority environment, will the arts/language interdisciplinary learning influence French cultural identity, sense of belonging to the French community and motivation to learn and to use French in everyday lives?

Method

Teaching strategies

I developed eighteen music/arts/language interdisciplinary lesson plans in collaboration with a third grade French first language classroom teacher. They were team taught by the classroom teacher and me three times a week for a period of six weeks. Specific learning objectives were identified for both French and music. French language curriculum objectives pertaining to oral and written comprehension, reading, writing, vocabulary, literacy genres, grammar, and oral and written composition were covered during the intervention. Also, musical concepts such as timbre, style, rhythm, melody, and form were emphasized in the interdisciplinary lessons. Moreover, common elements between language and the arts such as means of communication, oral, and written composition strategies were critically discussed. Pantomime, acting, sound effects, chanting, playing instrumental accompaniments, singing, dancing, active and critical listening, drawing, and language and musical composition were the activities chosen to reinforce concepts in both French and in the arts.
Research perspective

Since this study was developed as a collaborative effort between the public school and the university/research environments, a qualitative collaborative research design was chosen where both the classroom teacher and researcher are reflective partners in the co-construction of knowledge pertaining to educational practice (Cole & Knowles, 1993; Davidson, Wasser, & Bresler, 1996; Desgagné, 1997; Schön, 1983, 1987, 1994). This type of research values the competency of the actor-practitioner as a key informant of the investigation (Giddens, 1987). Collaborative research also has dual outcomes, thus, is beneficial to both the researcher and the practitioner. It unites both research goals (production of knowledge) and educational goals (professional development and reflexive opportunities for the teacher to improve his/her practice). In this study, it was anticipated that while answering the research questions, it would also give the teacher professional development in offering ways to incorporate the arts to her French language curriculum.

Data collection and analysis

An emergent research design using qualitative methods of data collection and analysis were used to address the first three research concerns of this study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Eisenhart & Howe, 1992; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Robson, 1993) while data from the last question were analysed through quantitative statistical procedures. Qualitative data was collected through:

1. video tapes of all classroom intervention;
2. photos of events in the classroom;
3. audio tapes of in-depth semi-structured interviews with the classroom teacher, students, and the research assistant;
4. informal interviews held with the teachers, school principal, parents, and children;
5. written materials including lesson plans, copies of songs, and language arts books;
6. personal journal kept by me.

Data were analysed through processes of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987) and triangulation (Bresler & Stake, 1992; Mathison, 1988).

A questionnaire developed by Landry and Allard (1987) to identify levels of cultural identity was administered to all students (n=26) before and after the experimental period. Since the questionnaire had been developed and validated for grade 12 students, questions were reformulated to meet the linguistic expectancies of a grade three student population. Students representing the population of this study then validated the questionnaire.

Data were analysed in order to identify differences between pre- and post-test scores.

Results: Emergent themes

Many themes were identified during the course of the study and will be discussed in the following paragraphs. Many educators state that meaningful learning occurs in a meaningful context and that the role of the teacher consists of establishing the environment in order for effective learning to take place (Drake, 1998). In fact, the findings of this study illustrate that the interdisciplinary pedagogical strategies planned and developed by the teachers and utilized during the intervention contributed to the success of the study.

Interdisciplinary arts/French language lessons were prepared and taught by the classroom teacher in collaboration with me. The lesson plans were developed with a constructivist approach to learning emphasizing a child centered pedagogy where students build on previous learning experiences and discover new learning (Heuwinkel, 1996). The teacher thus prepares the learning environment to ensure independent learning and the use of meta-cognition skills. The following data illustrates these results:

“You always drew the information from the students,” says the classroom teacher. “You are constantly questioning the students on what were the strategies he or she used in order to reach his or her conclusion. I feel this is very important so that the students can apply mental processes in other situations.”

Activities that were chosen to enhance student learning seemed to be of interest to all participants. Students, during informal and formal interviews, shared that they loved inventing the most. Two strong students spontaneously said that the element that stimulated them the most during the interdisciplinary arts/French lessons was that all of the ideas used in the compositions and other creative activities came from them. All of the sources of data showed that the compositional activities (songs, game and mega...
visual art, theatre, dance, and music activities) were “tops” in the minds of the children. Students also loved acting and creating pantomime and dance gestures to non-verbally express the meaning of a text.

“It was fun investing “our” song because we got to decide the words and the music.”

“I loved it when we put all the parts together, mime, music and drawing … it helped us to better understand our story.”

Learning was identified in French, music and other art forms and students were able to make connections between these subject areas.

From the very beginning to the end of the study, all sources of the data indicate that learning in French was gradually being observed. Students were composing prose and poetry, were learning new vocabulary, applying rules of grammar, reading and writing with ease and comprehension and deepening these skills as the study unfolded. In fact, after three weeks of the intervention, both the classroom teacher and me were noticing that

“Children were gaining skills in French, music, visual arts and math and were also developing problem solving, and critical thinking skills.”

“Very well rounded educational project,” observed the classroom teacher.

In music, most students were able to name and describe instruments belonging to the percussion and string families. They were also able to discuss Handel, Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Chopin, Schubert, and Bartok in relation to specific musical compositions and place them in their respective historical periods. They could also improvise and compose short melody/rhythmic patterns to accompany a given text, sing on pitch with good sound quality, and play some type percussion instruments with proper technique and rhythmical accuracy. Moreover, they demonstrated some ability to identify musical elements in selected musical repertoire. The classroom teacher and the school music specialist observed that students developed an appreciation for music and, in certain cases, changed their attitude towards music class.

Students, during the learning process, also demonstrated skills in drawing, acting, dance, and math (students were asked to calculate the life-spans of the composers). Moreover, students were able to make connections between strategies used to compose music and literacy texts, between arts and language as means of communication, scientific inventors and musical composers, and musical accentuation and language punctuation. In all, the classroom teacher testified that the learning outcomes of the interdisciplinary arts/French project extended beyond her personal expectations and above the levels required by the French language curriculum.

The interdisciplinary arts/French project enhanced student well being

School is not only about learning content and acquiring skills related to areas of study. School is also about developing social skills and promoting personal growth in order to be a well rounded person ready to face the complexities of everyday life (Gardner, 1983). In fact, this study, besides promoting learning in the arts and in French, helped to develop creative, motivated, and well rounded Grade 3 French students. Children often expressed feelings of being well contented, proud, and able after engaging in a creative endeavour. In our opinion, the self-esteem felt by the students contributed very importantly to the success of the study. In fact, Goleman (1996) states that intrapersonal ways of knowing (Gardner, 1983) are essential factors that determine educational and life success. He adds that when teachers employ strategies that include the development of this intelligence, the curriculum becomes interdisciplinary and allows for students with different learning styles to succeed.

This child centered interdisciplinary study, based on constructivist theories of education where the individual constructs his or her own learning and learns new ideas by integrating them into existing knowledge (Heuwinkel, 1996), was beneficial for both the students and teachers.

Students

Firstly, students were challenged to move beyond memorizing facts, to pursue a topic in depth, and to see patterns and relationships, thus, to construct knowledge rather than to merely accumulate information. For example, while being engaged in creative French/arts activities, students were making connections between language and arts skills and constructing the new knowledge acquired from hands on experience related to the concepts under study. Moreover, students were transferring learning in one subject area to another.

Second, students gained respect for one another and for the two teachers who were leading the interdisciplinary activities.

“I saw the development of a climate of respect among the students. They needed to work
in collaboration, to build together. It was not easy at first, but, I was amazed at how well they worked together at the construction of their French/music/art board game,” said the classroom teacher.

The students also learned to express their understanding through the arts. They realised that the arts were a means of communication and that they have the power to help them gain a better understanding of the stories studied in their French language textbook.

“The music added “color” to our story. It makes our story more complete,” says a student.

The interdisciplinary project seemed to reach all children, that is, the visual, the auditory and the kinaesthetic learners. The visual learners were invited to read either a text or words to a song, the auditory, to listen to recordings and to express their insights through verbal or artistic expression, and the kinaesthetic, to perform in activities where the children were asked to sing, dance, act or draw. In addition, all children participated in the activities, not only the academically stronger ones. Moreover, children were given the choice to participate in the musical, dramatic art, visual art or dance activities connected to a literary text. Therefore, every student was able to express him or herself through the artistic form closer to their talent and interest.

The researcher and the classroom teacher observed that children were learning without realizing it. One academically challenged child, who participated fully during the intervention, shared:

“I liked the project because it took us away from school work.”

The classroom teacher added: “Eric who would not write is writing … Wow!”

Teacher

One of the goals of collaborative research is to provide professional development for the classroom teacher. Truly, the classroom teacher acknowledged that she received the training anticipated when the project was discussed in its early development. In fact, she did continue some of the activities once the project ended. She felt comfortable with leading some of the musical activities such as singing, creating sound effects with the musical instruments, and, with the aid of the school music specialist, with identifying composers and musical compositions pertaining to a specific era. On the other hand, she did not feel comfortable with the musical compositional activities. She added that she would feel confident to work with the children in creating the words to a song but that the children with the help of the music specialist must compose the music. The project, nevertheless, gave her insight on how to incorporate the arts into her French curriculum and to bring the students to make connections between language and the arts.

To summarize, the interdisciplinary French/arts project was beneficial in many ways to all participants and did enhance the children’s motivation towards French language arts learning. Throughout the interdisciplinary learning experience, teacher/researcher roles were specified. In this collaborative research study, both the university researcher and the public school teacher played dual roles. During the classroom intervention, I (university researcher) became a teacher while during the collection, analysis, and communication of the results of the study the classroom teacher took on the role of a researcher. In fact, I, (a music educator who had several years of teaching experience in the public schools) was responsible for leading the musical and drama parts of the language/arts activities. On the other hand, the grade 3 classroom teacher, with an intensive experience of teaching French language arts and visual arts, conducted these sections of the interdisciplinary lessons. Even though both teachers according to their areas of expertise shared the leadership of the activities, each interdisciplinary activity was team taught by the classroom teacher and me. It is interesting to note that the data revealed that teaching styles were compatible.

“We both have the same philosophy of teaching and learning,” said the classroom teacher.

“This is the only way a project like this can work”. “Both teachers must be flexible, open to change and able to adapt when faced with unpredictable situations. In addition, we must be passionate about what we are doing. It’s a real team effort,” she adds.

Research and curricular agendas were identified as areas of concern

Based on results of previous studies (Lowe, 2002a, 2002b), I identified certain research and curriculum preoccupations and these guiding issues influenced decisions made during the whole research process. First of all, I needed to collect data. Therefore, while planning the interdisciplinary lessons with the classroom teacher, or while speaking informally with the classroom teacher, students and other potential informants, I needed to record all these conversations in the eventuality that they could be used as important data sources. Moreover, I needed to make sure that all lessons were video-taped
by a research assistant, that photographs were taken, and that time was allocated to formally interview students, teachers, and school staff in order to make meaning of the entire experience. On the other hand, I was also concerned with giving the classroom teacher her niche and creating a teaching environment where the teacher would be at ease to express her views in the co-construction of knowledge emerging from the experience.

More importantly, I was constantly preoccupied with the curricular objectives of the French language program, continually checking with the classroom teacher to make sure that the interdisciplinary lessons learning outcomes went hand in hand with those of the French program, and that she was not falling behind in her program. It is important to note that the underlying concerns mentioned in this section prevailed throughout the study.

Cultural awareness

A pre- and post-test questionnaire was administered to all students to measure cultural identity, sense of competency, sense of belonging and motivation to learn and to function in French in a region where French is the language of the minority population. Means and standard deviations were calculated, and correlation and t-test statistical procedures were performed to determine relationships and differences between pre- and post-test scores for each variable measured by the questionnaire.

The results of the questionnaire measuring cultural awareness did not show any improvements between pre- and post project. However, all qualitative data sources did reveal that students were engaged and motivated to learn French. Reading and writing were elements identified by the classroom teacher where significant growth was observed the most. Some parents also shared that their children were reading and writing more at home and were composing songs and dances related to stories read either at home or at school. Above all, the classroom teacher testified that children wanted to continue to engage in creative arts/French activities even after the project was ended. In fact, one month later, they created a rap and a dance to accompany a poem they wrote for French class and the artistic creation was performed for parents during a spring “happening”. When the classroom teacher was sharing this information, she added that the children would surely never forget this experience.

Conclusion

Before attempting to suggest areas to explore for future studies, I will draw a few comparisons among results of three qualitative type studies done with grade 2 students where music and other art forms were integrated to both English and French language arts classrooms. First, all studies showed, like this one, that learning occurred in language and in the arts (Lowe, 2002a, 2002b). Moreover, all studies, including the one described in this paper, revealed that the integrated language/arts activities and the pedagogical strategies used motivated the children and contributed to the success of the studies. In addition, all results show that school administrators, teachers and parents supported the projects. Although the results of the study performed with grade 2 French students from the same school as the one chosen for this study (Lowe, 2002b) revealed significant differences in some of the areas measured in the cultural awareness questionnaire, the results of this study showed no significant differences. In future studies, extensive formal and informal interviews with the children might bare more reliable results.

The new knowledge emerging from the study relates to the development of self-esteem observed in all the sources of the data. Students felt proud of their achievements and expressed their pride through applauds, smiles and verbal expressions. Even Rick, who didn’t feel he was good at anything, received applauds from his classmates after performing his pantomime of the rising of the sun. Again, we acknowledge the power of the arts to increase self-esteem and to reach the child in the depth of his emotional being thus, enabling him or her to learn.

Where do we go from here? As Oddeleifson (1989) indicated in a survey of the literature in 1989, the arts stimulate learning and the ability to learn. Moreover, Anderson (1992) affirms that music can be an effective medium to teach reading and writing at the primary level. Hancock (1996) also points out that music enhances the capacity for higher-order thinking. This study supports these assertions and acknowledges also the non-academic benefits such as the development of creative abilities and the development of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. However, educators still resist the integrated arts approach to language learning! This resistance could be due to the fact that an interdisciplinary approach to learning would demand a shift in teaching methodology and in ways of viewing assessment. In order to implement major change into regional and national institutions, more pilot projects, similar to the one described in this article, need to be developed which include a strong research component with convincing
data that will help us construct new understandings of the benefits and advantages of the arts integrated to the language curriculum. These findings may persuade educators that new approaches to teaching and learning must be developed in order to reach the full potential of the learner, and that the arts have the power to do so.
References


