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Jamie Keddie brings art to the classroom.

In Colombian artist and sculptor Fernando Botero's world there is a distinct lack of smiles. Even when engaged in family get-togethers, friendly reunions and familiar situations from Latin American culture, the subjects of his paintings often seem to be lost in a melancholic pensiveness as if to say 'this curious thing called *life*

that I have found myself caught up in is far too serious for celebration'.

Despite this element of austerity, Botero's work is largely cheerful and regarded with affection. It is colourful and cartoon-like. Whereas in the universe of Matt Groening (creator of *The Simpsons*), people have yellow skin and four fingers on each hand, in Botero's they have shrunken facial features and over-inflated, round voluptuous bodies.

So how can we use artwork like this to teach language in the classroom? What follows is a lesson plan that I have used with a number of different classes, which I hope you will be able to adapt to suit yours.

Step 1

Is that a smile I see?

When selecting art for the classroom, it pays to choose something that connects with your learners' lives in some way. I live and teach in Barcelona, which is home to two of Fernando Botero's sculptures: a fat cat just round the corner from my flat and a stocky horse at the airport.

I tell my learners that I have a picture of Barcelona's most famous cat (open to argument, of course). They can usually work out what the photograph is and I then show it to them.



I ask them what they know about Botero's cat and it turns out that there is actually quite a lot to be said. The sculpture has been moved several times, partly due to a disagreement between the artist and the Barcelona authorities.

I tell my students that a few days ago I had an argument with a friend. I am sure that the cat is smiling, but my friend disagrees. I ask my students what they think, and we have a vote. I point



out that if we can't agree about something as simple as this, then we certainly won't all share the same ideas about more complex questions of art. This draws attention to the subjective nature of interpretation – often there is no right or wrong.

Finally, I ask my learners if they know any other work by the same artist.

Step 2

Art adjectives

Next, we turn the classroom into an art gallery. I have an old wall calendar of Botero's paintings that I cut up for this purpose. My students pin the prints up on the wall while I go around and stick pre-prepared post-it notes beside each one which tell us the names and dates of the paintings.

Calendars are perfect for this purpose. Image size and quality are good and, unlike books, we aren't afraid of taking the scissors to them. Alternatively, it is easy to find art postcards and posters online. Rather than a gallery, you could set up a slide show by downloading images from the internet and displaying them on a computer.

Get your learners to make a list of English adjectives that pertain in some way or another to the work on display. Have them do this as they walk around the gallery or sit through the slide show. Allow them to do it in pairs if they like and give them access to bilingual

dictionaries if you feel it is necessary.

You may also decide to offer suggestions.

After this, collate and compare all the adjectives that have arisen and write them on the board.

Obtaining images from the internet

- 1 Go to www.Google.com and above the item entry space, you will see the word *Images*. Click on it and you will be taken to the Google image search site.
- 2 In the search window, type in the name of an artist, for example *Botero*.
- 3 You will find multiple copies of thumbnail (miniature) images of Botero paintings (among other things). Click on one of them and you will be given the option to 'see full-size image'. Find one that is both clear and of good size.
- 4 To save an image, right click on it and choose 'Save image as ...'. Save it onto your hard disk.
- 5 Print these images off so that you can pin them up on the walls of your classroom, thus converting it into a gallery. Alternatively, organise them on your computer so that you can display them as a slideshow.

Step 3

Language comparisons

There will always be a large amount of cyberspace dedicated to any well-known international artist. I found and printed off six short paragraphs from different websites, online articles, blogs, Wikipedia (the free online encyclopedia), and so on, each of which described Botero's work.

If you feel that such texts contain a lot of obscure, potentially problematic language, you may decide to make gentle alterations before presenting them to your learners.

I distributed the six paragraphs around the class and allowed them to circulate among the students, who had been put into small groups. For each paragraph, I had each group of learners identify and copy down the ten pieces of language (individual words or sentences) that they felt were most important for referring to and describing Botero's art.

For example, with one class, the first paragraph on the Wikipedia entry for Fernando Botero yielded the following:

- *A similar style to Pablo Picasso during the world wars*
- *Abstract artist*
- *Aesthetic*
- *Animal figures*
- *Colour*
- *Exaggerated proportions*
- *Human figures*
- *Landscapes*
- *The fat people are often thought by critics to satirise the subjects and situations that Botero chooses to paint*
- *The most Colombian of Colombian artists*

Once every group has seen all six paragraphs, go over the results and discuss choices.

Step 4

Art and communication

So what does it mean?

According to a friend of mine who teaches art history, there is a tendency for art students to overuse this question during the early days of their studies. In other words, there is often an assumption that artists have an explicit, intended message that they wish to transmit through their work. Botero himself said:

'An artist is attracted to certain kinds of form without knowing why. You adopt a position intuitively; only later do you attempt to rationalize or even justify it.'

On the other hand, '*all art is communication*' (also Botero's words).

I share these ideas with my learners and ask them to take another look at what is on offer in the classroom. After reminding them of the subjective nature of artistic interpretation by once again referring to the smiling cat, I ask them to think about what is being communicated through the artist's work, encouraging them to consider questions such as:

- *Do you like Botero's work or not? Which is your favourite piece?*
- *What does his art communicate to you? Does it remind you of anything (the work of other painters, dreams or experiences you have had, people or places you know, etc)?*

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- Is there anything you can say about the artist by looking at his work?
- Can you identify any symbolism in the work?
- Do you think there is any intended message or agenda?

One group of learners came to the joint conclusion that perhaps Botero is implying (either consciously or unconsciously) that in this world, humans take up too much space.

Step 5

Art critics

Give out scraps of paper to your learners, each with the name of a different newspaper (*The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *El Pais*, *La Vanguardia*, etc).

Tell your students that they are art critics and that they have to write a short review of the classroom art exhibition for their newspaper.

Encourage them to use all the language that has arisen (the adjectives, the vocabulary taken from the internet, etc). Tell them to describe and analyse the work. Give them a minimum number of words (200, for example). This can be a homework task.

Step 6

A permanent accusation

In 2003, the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq became infamous when a number of photographs showing the mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners were revealed to the world. In response to these images, Fernando Botero produced a series of 50 paintings and a number of sketches depicting the scenes of humiliation and abuse.

Seeing Botero's figures being subjected to such horrors takes some getting used to. There is a bizarre sense that the protagonists of his art do not belong in such a situation any more than do, for example, any of the

Simpsons cartoon characters. In fact, it is precisely this play-on-context that creates part of the impact. Botero himself said, 'No one would have ever remembered *Guernica* if not for the painting. Art is a permanent accusation.'

I wondered what my learners would make of it all.

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I asked them what they know about Abu Ghraib. Most of them remembered the photographs and were able to describe them. I then showed four of Botero's pieces and the class identified the artist immediately. I put them into small groups and gave them the following questions to consider:

- If the atrocities of Abu Ghraib are defined by the original photographs, what is the point of Botero's depictions?
- Which are more dramatic – the original photographs or the paintings? Can you say why?
- What do the paintings communicate that the photographs don't. What do the photographs communicate that the paintings don't?
- Does any of this relate to the following quotations?

'Art does not reproduce what is visible; it makes things visible.' (Paul Klee)

'Art is a permanent accusation.' (Fernando Botero)

On the whole, students gave good responses to these questions. One class decided that the original photographs put the spotlight on the perpetrators of the crimes whereas the paintings focus on the victims themselves and the suffering that they endured.

Note: the original photographs from inside Abu Ghraib as well as Botero's depictions can be downloaded from the internet in the same way as outlined

above. There is also a short movie on Botero's Abu Ghraib series at www.youtube.com (type in 'permanent accusation'). Many of these images are particularly shocking and it goes without saying that if you choose to take them into class, you should use your professional judgement and tact to decide which ones you select and how you use them.



In an article titled *When words and images collide*, communications professional Mark Walston writes:

'Since the time when the Cro-Magnon cave painters of southern France first dipped their fingers into wetted earth and covered the wall with pictorial displays of their hunting prowess ... symbols and images, mediated by artists and laden with thought, gave humans their understanding of the world.'

Art lends itself perfectly to the language classroom. It is a form of communication that can potentially surpass boundaries that a given language cannot. Most importantly for the classroom, the subjective process of interpretation works best as a dialogic, collaborative effort. To quote from Wikipedia:

'... it might be argued that the very subjectivity of art demonstrates its importance in providing an arena in which rival ideas might be exchanged and discussed, or to provide a social context in which disparate groups of people might congregate and mingle.' **ETP**

Mark Walston's article *When words and images collide* can be seen at www.conceptfoundry.com.



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