



#### Global Journal of Arts Humanity and Social Sciences

ISSN: 2583-2034

Abbreviated key title: Glob.J.Arts.Humanit.Soc.Sci

Frequency: Monthly

Published By GSAR Publishers

Journal Homepage Link: https://gsarpublishers.com/journal-gjahss-home/

Volume - 5 | Issue - 8 | August 2025 | Total pages 591-598 | DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.16759393

Teaching vocabulary and terminology to arts students in a general English course

#### By

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### <u>Article History</u>

Received: 01- 08- 2025 Accepted: 06- 08- 2025 Published: 08- 08- 2025

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#### **Abstract**

The article suggests a new approach to vocabulary and terminology teaching to arts (and possibly other specialties) students within teaching them general English (GE). Teaching English for specific purposes (ESP) is normally viewed as attainable at B2 or higher levels of English proficiency. However, teaching GE at higher educations institutions (HEIs) may be de/unmotivating for students. That is why the article suggests teaching 'pre-ESP' to GE students to increase their motivation and engagement. A qualitative study – an interview of 10 English teachers working at three Georgian HEIs delivering arts programs – was conducted. Purposeful selection of interviewees was applied. The obtained results reveal that teachers confirm de/unmotivation of many arts students while studying GE, which is explained by the lack of links with their future professions. The teachers try to compensate it by introducing themselves arts-related topics, vocabulary and terminology and arts-based activities. This is why they believe that an art-oriented GE textbook would help them to teach more efficiently. However, they expect a possible resistance of administration based on the desire of following the existing practices and rigid curricula/syllabi. The article may be interesting for both practitioner teachers and researchers of teaching languages at HEIs.

**Keywords:** ESP, English for arts students, vocabulary teaching, terminology teaching, motivation to learn general English

#### Introduction

The contemporary trend in higher education is to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in two stages: General English (GE) in the first year and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in the second year. Correspondingly, to take an ESP course, a Bachelor student is expected first to pass the level requirements according to CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020) corresponding to B2 level (West et al., 2020). Those students who already possess a B2 level can immediately start ESP, skipping the study of GE. However, this attitude often causes boredom among students with English levels lower than B2 who are not majoring in English and whose main motive to study at a university is the field they have chosen (Kruk, 2016; Li et al., 2021; Li, 2021). Students generally want to study English in a way that will enable them to use it for professional reasons. The attitude to vocabulary teaching in GE courses that would benefit students in tackling their professional needs will be suggested in the current paper.

There are people who believe that arts students do not necessarily need to study ESP, as, compared to specialties like engineering, business, law, chemistry, medicine, etc., they do not really need to study ESP, as the language used by arts specialists (except probably art researchers and critics) is not scientific, and studying only GE will make a sufficient basis for arts students to use English after graduation. However, discussing arts requires understanding of a lot of terms, some of them, like arts directions, are common for various arts, and some are specific to fine arts, sculpture, architecture, performing arts, etc. Besides, as Bromley (2002) states, each sphere has vocabulary typical for it, and this vocabulary can/has to be taught in the process of general English teaching.

Textbooks to teach English for arts students exist (e.g., Khaghaninejad, 2016; Amalia et al., 2025). These books teach English for arts students as ESP, which is mentioned in their preamble, and they apply the following activities to teach vocabulary and terminology: multiple choice, gap filling, finding synonyms of the given words in the text, matching the word with the synonym/definition, word formation (filling in the gaps with the derivatives of the given word), flashcards, word thematic and grammatical classification, and semantic mapping (Amalia et al., 2025; Khaghaninejad, 2016; McKenna, 2006). These activities





may be useful for word/terminology memorization, however, do not trigger motivation, especially dealing with professional needs. Harmer (2007) believes that these activities may be functional, but they fail to create a meaningful connection between real-life needs and student's mental lexicon. Besides, they are mostly bound to teaching reading and writing. Some authors (Labrocca, 2015) suggest hand-on engagement as a more motivating activity linking the vocabulary with the objects it represents. The approach that the researcher suggests in the current article deals with teaching vocabulary in GE courses oriented on arts students professional interests.

The systematic approach of arts in GE teaching at higher education institutions' arts programs remains a gap in the existing literature dealing with using arts for teaching vocabulary and arts terminology, which this article is trying to bridge.

#### **Literature Review**

"People say a picture paints a thousand words, but for a language teacher, it seems intuitively true that a picture might elicit a thousand words in ways that vocabulary research suggests are best for tasks for vocabulary learning, especially activities that encourage students to search the vocabulary they have already studied and use it creatively in new ways" (McGuire, 2016, p. 1). Art can be used as a pedagogical tool for improving English as a native/second/foreign vocabulary learning even while teaching school and even kindergarten children whose English level is just A1/A2 (Alifia, 2022; Arciniegas Mafla & Zárate Cantillo, 2024; Ferrugia, 1990; Pineda-Herrera & Troya-Sanchez, 2025; Rivas Ballesteros et al., 2020). When arts are integrated in language classes, students' attention is transferred to them, thus they experience less language anxiety compared to purely linguistic and communicative activities; learners become more self-directed, and critical thinking skills are developed (Rivas Ballesteros et al., 2020).

McGuire (2016) discusses an activity which he calls visual thinking strategies (VTSs). The activity applies seemingly simple questions: What do you see in this ...? What do you see that makes you think that? And What more can you find? He emphasizes that VTS question/answer activities enable students to express freely (on a low language level this ability is limited by the scare language repertoire, however, the desire may be so strong that students take the trouble to find independently the needed vocabulary to express their ideas and feelings) their perception of pieces of art. Images are anyway applied in general language teaching, so, our suggestion is to apply drawings, paintings, photos of sculptures and architectural monuments, videos of arts installations and theatrical performances more actively while teaching GE to arts students? Students begin with simple description naming objects, animals, plants, furniture, in the painting and then try to speak about the emotions the painting causes. McGuire (2016) describes cooperative learning applied when dealing with artworks in the process of vocabulary learning and underscores that it develops students' learning strategies and teamwork skills. Eventually, it further promotes students' aesthetic

development. McGuire (2016) links visual thinking strategies with Bloom's taxonomy (1956). The knowledge of vocabulary deals with presenting a word and either explaining its semantics in this or that way (object, picture, synonyms, antonyms, definitions, context) or helping students elicit the meaning of the word independently, based on verbal and/or visual context. Comprehension, then, is assessed during various test-like activities (gap-filling, matching, multiple choice, true/false). Application is achieved through speaking or writing tasks which require using the new vocabulary. Analysis requires using the vocabulary under study to analyse a given art work. Evaluation of a work of art demands that students express their opinion of it. And, finally, synthesis enables students to make presentations or write articles about the work of art. The questions teacher may ask to lead students through these stage are: Can you name the... . Describe what happened at.... What was the main idea...? How was this similar to...? Can you defend your position about...?

Gerngross and Puchta (1992) provided many picture-based tasks based on artwork (e.g., Picture dictation, p. 72 and Would you call that art?, p. 133). We might offer comparison of two paintings with the same plot but different authors or same author but in different periods. Unfortunately, these resources are not normally offered as a coherent course and can only be made up, found, or selected by an enthusiastic language teacher. For lower-level language learners describing still lives or landscapes can be recommended.

As mentioned by McGuire (2016), the Ministry of Education in Japan requires that school graduates have to be able to fulfil such tasks as explain, present, report, and describe. Dealing with art objects perfectly fits with the task. McGuire (2016) describes Nation's (2007) four strands approach to language learning: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language focused learning, and fluency development. For meaning-focused input, in the process of GE learning by arts students listening and reading texts dealing with arts, but simplified according to their level of English skills, can be used. For meaning-focused output, students may write some arts pieces description (writing in this case is easier than speaking, as they can use dictionaries and even AI help), further present it orally (it will not be spontaneous, still useful), and only after some time do spontaneous oral presentations. On language-focused learning stage the aboveenumerated 'boring but useful' activities may be used, but in artistic context, which will make them reasonably attractive. Hulstijn and Laufer's (2001) Involvement Load Hypothesis, also analysed by McGuire (2016), on the other hand, is based on three main factors involved in vocabulary learning: need, search, and evaluation. When language students of arts majors are asked to write or speak about some artefact or performance of their choice, they will experience the need to do so. They will be glad to search the corresponding information on the internet, evaluate its contents and language, and modify them according to their language abilities and artistic viewpoints.

Swain and Lapkin (1998) recommend negotiation of meaning to teach terminology. There is no need to teach artistic terminology actively on the GE teaching stage, but some minimum needed to





speak about arts such as portrait, still life, marinist and animalist painting will only help to overcome the boredom while dealing with non-artistic topics like meals.

Yenawine (2003; 2013) recommends selecting artworks according to the following criteria: it must be interesting, have a potential to create a story (at least several sentences-long), and enable interpretations. Arts students may know the history behind a famous artwork (how it was created, perceived by pubic and critics, etc.).

Alifia (2022) mentions that artworks enable students participate in debates and discussions, stimulate thinking and communication. They activate students' right brain responsible for emotional reactions and thus increase memorization. Based on Garner's Multiple Intelligence Theory (1983), involvement of art in language classes increases those students' learning efficiency who belong to visual-special, body-kinesthetic, and musical intelligence groups, depending on the type of arts applied in teaching/learning. Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1971) supports the creation of a link between imagery/sounds and concepts/words/terminology in the process of language learning.

To overcome boredom and to experience achievement, according to Control Value Theory (Pekrun, 2006), using arts in language classes is an effective approach, especially when students' majors is arts. "Boredom is assumed to be induced when a learner perceives an ongoing activity or learning material as lacking in relevance, importance, or subjective value" (Li, 2021, p. 4).

Describing objects, people, or landscapes may be a boring activity for university students, however, when an art student is describing a painting/sculpture/building/theatrical or movie episode, they act like a museum guide or an art critic, and the activity becomes meaningful and authentic. To help students describe, the teacher can ask descriptive questions: who, when, which, where, how, and what - to describe the sensuous properties of the work: colour, line, shape, and texture (Ferrugia, 1990, p.6). To teach arts terminology, teachers can apply concept-attaining and concept-formation approaches. Concept-attaining is preferable for students who are good at inductive learning (examples → concepts), while conceptformation for students good at deductive learning. Therefore, language teachers may give several works of art that illustrate a concepts, e.g., three paintings which are still-lives, and ask students what is the Georgian (or another native language, according to the audience) for a still-life. She/he may then ask students define the term without teacher's definition. However, sometimes, readymade definitions may be given in the process of new vocabulary presentation, and then students can be asked to fulfil a term/definition matching task.

Naming objects, body positions, and actions, describing light and colours, various tactile perceptions is useful while speaking about painting. Making up semantic maps, uniting the used words in thematic groups is recommended to organise the words in the mental lexicon (McKenna, 2006). Role play is suggested by McKenna (2006) to help memorise vocabulary/terminology through communicative activities. She offers to play out a situation

when one interlocutor announces to a detective that that his/her work of art was stolen and describe it. The detective has photos of several art objects found, and he/she has to guess according to the description which object was stolen. Speaking about favourite (or disliked) works of art/artist explaining the reasons of the student's attitude is a good way to develop speaking skills as well as the ability to do some critique.

#### Method

An online interview was conducted via Google Meet with ten English instructors teaching GE to arts students. Two of them were males and eight females, which approximately corresponds to gender distribution at Georgia higher education institutions among English teachers. The interviewees were selected purposefully, as they had to be aware of how teaching GE is done in arts programs. All participant were volunteers. The interview was recorded and then transcribed. The participants were informed about the anonymity and confidentiality of the results, the possibility to quit from the study at any moment without any negative consequences for them, and the goals of the study. They confirmed their agreement in the beginning of the interview. The interviewees came from three different public higher education institutions where arts students are engaged. Content analysis was applied to the transcript. The answers were coded as themes and sub-themes. The themes were preselected according to the questions asked, while the sub-themes (categories) were partially pre-defined and partially defined based on the interviewees' answers. questions asked were:

- 1. How motivated are your students to learn general English? What are their motives?
- 2. If some students are unmotivated or demotivated, what reasons do they name?
- 3. Does the textbook of general English used in your program offer activities professionally useful and/or interesting for arts students?
- 4. Do you try to modify the materials offered by the textbook and make them more attractive for your arts students? If so, what do you do? Does it make your students happier?
- 5. Do you think that students' English proficiency levels A2 and B1 enable (is enough for) students to listen, speak, read, and write on arts-based topics?
- 6. Would you like to have a textbook of general English which contains more vocabulary useful for future ESP learning (useful to discuss art)?
- 7. If there is a General English textbook, so to say, on Preprofessional basis (art-oriented), do you foresee any possible problems related to its application?

The teachers were codified as T1fU1 (MA) (a female teacher from university #1, holding a Master's degree), T2fU1 (PhD), T3fU1 (PhD), Tf4U1 (MA); T5mU2 (PhD) (teacher male from university#2), T6fU2 (MA); T7fU2 (MA); T8mU2 (PhD); T9fU3 (PhD) (teacher female from university #3), and T10fU3 (PhD). The obtained results are presented in Table 1.





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Themes	Sub-themes (categories)	Answer examples
1 Student motivation	Level: moderate to high	T9fU3 (PhD): At my university students possess medium to high motivation to learn General English. They realize the need to learn it, but some are too lazy. T1fU1 (MA): My students have a moderate motivation to learn General English. This is not exactly what they expected at university, too similar to learning at school.
	Type: Intrinsic (personal development) and extrinsic (career prospects); instrumental (global communication; future academic opportunities; access to art resources) and integrative (becoming part of international artistic community)	T2fU1 (PhD): Some are really motivated leaners; they want to learn to the maximum of their capacity. They just enjoy learning. But such students are few.  T8mU2 (PhD): They want to communicate with foreigners abroad and at home, for profession and during travel.  T6fU2 (MA): Their main motives include understanding international literature on art, participation in international exhibitions, and collaborating with artist across the globe.  T3fU1 (PhD): Career prospects — this is what most

			of them care about. T10fU3 (PhD): They are eager to participate in exchange projects like Erasmus+. For some of them this is the major reason to study at a university. Tf4U1 (MA): In creative industries nowadays, whether staying at home or going abroad, you cannot make a step without English. T5mU2 (PhD): They want to listen to artistic news on mass media and read on the internet with better comprehension.
2	Reasons for un/demotiv ation	Lack of connection with their profession  Textbook is quite boring  Low level of their own language skills (lack of self-confidence)  Time constraints  Lack of possibilities to apply language authentically	T6fU2 (MA): Lack of direct connection between the English lessons and their artistic interests.  T7fU2 (MA): Textbook content contains too many materials that are not interesting for them either personally or professionally. They are often outdated.  T9fU3 (PhD): Lack of self-confidence, especially if they feel behind their peers. They think if they couldn't learn English well enough in 11 years, what can they learn in one year?



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			T5mU2 (PhD):					Students are more
			Lack of practice					engaged when the
			opportunities in					teacher manages to
			real-world or					relate the lesson
			practical contexts					topic (e.g., meals)
			(exhibition					to activities
			presentations,					dealing with
			writing art					students' interests:
			critiques).					describing food on
			T3fU1 (PhD):					still lives and
			They are so busy					comparing
			with other subjects					contemporary
			that they can't					meals with the
			dedicate much					meals presented in
			time to English,					classical paintings.
			which is not					T9fU3 (PhD): I
			directly linked					add discussions
			with their					about famous
			profession.					artists where the
2	T411-	T1£	Tifui (MA).					topic under study
3	Textbook	Lack of materials and	T1fU1 (MA):					permits, for
	assessment	activities interesting for arts students	These are not ESP					instance, when the
			textbooks, so they are too general, not					topic is describing
		They offer insufficient	tailored to arts					a person
		vocabulary that can be	students interests.					appearance, I ask
		used while	Only some texts					students to
		listening/speaking/readin	deal with					describe theatrical
		g/writing about arts	architecture,					costumes or
			painting, and					portraits.
			music.		5	Relevance	A1 and B1 levels enable	T1fU1 (MA): A2
			T10fU3 (PhD):			of English	students to engage in	and especially B1
			They offer limited			proficiency	arts-based activities,	provide a basic
			vocabulary			levels A2	however, they may limit	foundation. For A2
			connected to visual			and B1 to	the depth and complexity	students
			or performing arts.			teach art-	of their communication.	description are Ok,
			This often leads to			related	Learners may struggle	even if they need
			low engagement in			vocabulary	with more detailed	to look up some
			class.			and	content and expression	words in the
			C1055.			terminolog		dictionary. B2
4	Teacher's	Materials and activities	T2fU1 (PhD):			у		level students can
	contributio	adaptation	Teachers at my			-		engage in
	n to		university often					expressing their
	making GE		adapt textbook					opinions.
	classes		materials to match					T8mU2 (PhD):
	more		to students' artistic					The lack of
	attractive		backgrounds.					language means
	to students		Tf4U1 (MA):					sometimes is a
			Teachers add					good stimulus for
			materials from the					students to work
			internet, especially					harder, but they are
			videos related to					glad when they
			students' artistic					achieve success.
			specialties.					Vygotsky's Zone
			T7fU2 (MA):					of Proximate
			1/102 (IVIA).	j				or roamide



			development (tasks a bit more difficult than what students can) really works.  T10fU3 (PhD): Some teacher scaffolding helps to overcome the language barrier.
6	Teachers' desire to have a GE textbook more adapted to arts students' needs	Having such a textbook would decrease teacher-preparation time and increase student engagement  Pre-ESP instead of GE textbooks for teaching at university is a great idea	T2fU1 (PhD): Having such textbooks would make life easier for teachers and more interesting for students.  T5mU2 (PhD): To make language teaching at university efficient, this is the most relevant approach. Not only for arts students, for engineering students, business students, business students, etc. This increases motivation, gets rid of boredom, raises engagement.  T9fU3 (PhD): This type of textbook should use visual art vocabulary, descriptive language for colours, textures, materials, and techniques. Phrases for critique and analysis would benefit them, too. Having such textbooks would support the smooth transition from school GE to university ESP.  Tf4U1 (MA): It would better prepare students for English for arts

			students ESP course.
7	Possible problems to using such textbooks	Teacher lack of competence in arts vocabulary and arts as a sphere of study  Students may have to struggle  Rigid curriculum/syllabus	T6fU2 (MA): Teachers may lack training or background knowledge and need special training.  T7fU2 (MA): Some students may think it is too difficult.  T3fU1 (PhD): Administration may resist using such textbooks as not 'fitting' to the standard approach. The teacher will have to struggle to prove the need in such an approach and to overcome rigid curricula and syllabi.

It is possible to see that the interviewed teachers perceived the idea enthusiastically, they even asked to share with them some practical materials, especially activities.

#### **Discussion**

#### Limitations and future research directions

The limitations of the article include the sample size (only 10 teachers from three universities) and geography (only in Georgia). They are also related to the subjectivity of interview as a research method. In the future it would be desirable to apply triangulation (teachers', students', and administrators' views) as well as enrich the research methods (a survey, observation, and test-retest experiment). The scale of the research needs to grow, too. However, the already obtained results provide enough materials for starting to think about the suggested approach and applying it practically.



#### **Conclusions and recommendations**

The interviewed teachers mentioned that, although their students realize the importance of high-level English skills for their future profession, they may be un/demotivated by studies too similar to those at school. They normally have expectations that their studies at HEIs will lead them to their professional success. The teachers express the opinion that students find GE textbooks not containing vocabulary and activities beneficial for students' fields of study, which makes the study boring for them. Teachers have to compensate this on their own, and this initiative may be disliked by the administration.

Even this limited samples enables the researcher to recommend for the moment teachers of arts students (and other ESPs) to incorporate some arts-based (or other specialties-based) activities into their GE teaching in order to motivate students and increase their engagement in the educational process. In the future, it is desirable to design textbooks that by level would be A2 and B1, mostly taught as GE, however, oriented on arts (or other fields), to cover the gap between teaching general English at school and English for specific purposes at HEIs.

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