Pictures as an aesthetical tool in English language teaching

An experimental study

Bilder som ett estetiskt verktyg i engelskundervisningen
En experimentell studie

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Title: Pictures as an aesthetical tool in English language teaching:
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En experimentell studie

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Abstract: This explorative qualitative case study aims at finding out about the impact of pictures as an aesthetical tool in English language teaching, through an experiment in the English classroom. Aesthetical tools are here defined as tools through which one can reach a stronger experience and improve learning. The independent variable in the experiment was a picture assignment and the dependent variable was a Chinese high school class and their teacher in English. After having done the experiment, the research questions were answered through a student questionnaire and an interview with the teacher. The study is based on Dewey’s theory of an experience (Dewey 1934) which is about the benefits of aesthetical experiences, and six themes of aesthetical experience provided by Uhrmacher (2009) meant to make education into such an experience. A majority of the subjects responded positively to the experiment, and the assignment seemed to be able to implement Uhrmacher’s six themes, at least to a certain extent. The claims of earlier findings are also echoed in this study.

Keywords: aesthetical tools, pictures and English language learning, Chinese high school students


Nyckelord: estetiska verktyg, bilder, engelsk språkinlärning, kinesisk högstadieklass
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1. Introduction

This study was undertaken to explore the pedagogical impact of the use of pictures in language learning through a small-scale experiment in a Chinese high school. The aim of the study was to find out about attitudes to the use of pictures in English language teaching held by a group of students and their teacher, specified in the research questions below. The use of pictures is in this case an attempt to integrate aesthetical tools into teaching, as a medium through which a learning-enhancing effect may be reached.

Opinions about aesthetics are many and it is a topic open to both philosophy and education. In the Swedish teacher training programme, there is little attention paid to aesthetics, and even though aesthetics was included I felt that aesthetics was underrated by many of my classmates, and I also believe there is a widespread belief that it is something “fuzzy” in contrast to traditional teaching. It has often been deemed not to contribute to the actual learning and instead is looked upon as merely enjoyable and fun – aesthetics is suitable for “aesthetical subjects” like dancing, music and art rather than other subjects. Thus an additional aim is to open the eyes of those readers who are skeptical to aesthetics and its usefulness and to show that aesthetics and teaching other subjects than those which are traditionally considered “aesthetical subjects” do not have to be mutually exclusive: that indeed would be confusing to a language learner. My interest, as well as that of the works I will cite in the background, is in the correlation between the two, how aesthetical tools may enhance teaching. However, this study is mainly concerned with a specific tool, namely pictures.

The term aesthetics is mainly used in the context of art, but Moroye and Uhrmacher (2009), who cite Dewey (1934), define aesthetics as derived from the term aesthetikos meaning “capable of sensory perception” – this way it may refer to what we experience through our senses in our lives in a much broader context than merely art (Moroye & Uhrmacher 2009:85). Based on Moroye and Uhrmacher, my own definition of the term aesthetical tools is that these are tools that may enrich an experience, which ideally makes the learning process better.

Dewey differentiates between daily, ordinary experience and an experience (1934: 35). It is Dewey’s theory of experience as well as six aesthetical themes mainly derived from Dewey’s theory of experience as accounted for in Moroye and Uhrmacher (2009) that has guided the
review of previous literature concerning the impact of aesthetical tools and how it may enhance learning, in this case language learning.

As a visual aid, pictures seem to be able attract people who dislike, for instance, reading in class. Schneider (2007:56-57) comments on how the use of comics allowed a student in her language arts class, who never bothered with reading, to gradually get past this barrier, and in time made him finish all of the class reading assignments. In the sense of Dewey, reading Batman comics made the reading experience pleasant and it contributed to the student diving into the world of literature (Schneider 2007). There are many articles on aesthetical tools like comics, digital games and picture books, but I have not been able to find any literature or study researching aesthetics in the same way as own investigation. Furthermore, the other studies are mostly about using aesthetics with younger students, whereas my focus is on high school students.

My experiment was undertaken in a Chinese high school. There was a high pressure on the students on receiving good grades and this put a heavy weight on the knowledge input of every lesson. After having discussed aesthetical tools and this project with my supervisor, I decided that researching the impact of pictures in this kind of context might contribute to the understanding of aesthetics, and whether it is a useful approach in teaching English in this place and in this age – if the benefits found in studies researching other subjects than language learning and focused on younger students will be supported by the present experiment or not.

1.1 Aims

The main aim of this study is to find out the attitudes of a Chinese high school class as well as their teacher’s attitude towards aesthetics in language learning, more precisely through the use of a two-page comic assignment as an aesthetical tool (pictures). The students’ attitudes were investigated through a questionnaire, and an interview was held with the teacher. More specifically, the aim was to learn the impact of pictures concerning enjoyment, study interest and English language learning improvement. It is a small scale study meant to explore and give insight rather than to prove conclusive results; more studies and larger scaled ones are needed to back up the results. With this in mind, the following are the chosen research questions:

i) What impact does the use of aesthetical tools have on language learning?
- What are the students’ attitudes to the use of pictures in the English language classroom?
- Do the students find pictures enjoyable and useful?
- Does the use of pictures lead to an increase of interest in the subject English?

ii) What impact does the use of aesthetical tools have on language teaching?
- What benefits/weaknesses can the teacher see with the use of pictures in English teaching?
- In the teacher’s opinion, are pictures a way of making the students more engaged?

2. Background

In this section, the relevant theories about aesthetics will be presented: aesthetical tools as a medium and tool for teaching and as a way of providing the students with an aesthetical experience. Theories and literature reviews on aesthetics, presented in 2.1 and 2.2, are followed by a presentation of six aesthetical themes and their educational value in 2.3. Lastly, in 2.4, different studies on aesthetical tools narrowed down to the use of pictures in language learning are presented. The first part of the background will explain and define the terms aesthetics and aesthetic experience and the role and benefit of aesthetical tools (see also section 1).

2.1 Teaching as communication

The philosopher John Dewey (1934:106) argues that we are too focused on one medium when communicating: spoken words. According to Dewey, there is a general belief that paintings, music or architecture can be translated into words, written or spoken – as such they are lesser mediums, being secondary to words. But Dewey argues that "each art has its own medium" fitted for "one kind of communication," and he also says that art is a language in its own right, not less important than words (Dewey 1934:106).

There are people like Makodia (2009:6) who claim that when we communicate, only 7% are actually words – the rest is conveyed through the tone of the voice, body language like stature, facial expressions, gestures and eye contact and even the way we dress. Makodia’s figures may very well be exaggerated and the statistics may not be applicable to all communication, but they still tell us something: communication is complex, and it is about more than words. It could be argued that the same thing holds for teaching. The basis for communication could be presented like this: There is a sender – the teacher, a message – the subject, a medium – e.g the whiteboard, textbooks, and tapes etc., a receiver – the students and finally there is also the effect (Dimbleby & Burton, 1998:21). Through a good medium we may reach a good effect, and aesthetical tools are the medium whose effect is the focus of this paper; more precisely the impact of pictures in English language teaching.
Dewey says that “communication is the process of creating participation” and “making common what had been isolated and singular” and also that “every art communicates because it expresses” (Dewey 1935:244). Because of its expressions, art can be used in many ways in communication and more specifically, in education – not only as individual subjects but also in subjects like language learning.

2.2 Aesthetics and teaching

Aesthetics is linked to one’s senses and experiences. In his book *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey distinguishes between daily, ordinary experience versus *an experience* (Dewey 1934:35). Different scholars have interpreted Dewey’s concept of an experience differently: one interpretation is that an aesthetic experience is “compelling and dramatic” (Girod, Rau & Schepige 2003:578). Aguirre (2004:259) calls it a “vital experience”. Yet another interpretation is that “aesthetic experiences are those that are immersive, infused with meaning, and felt as coherent and complete” (Parrish 2009:511). Even if there is a difference in the choice in words, all the definitions have some resemblance. And most importantly, they all view aesthetic experience as something that will strengthen an experience.

Acquired through our senses, fine art is a way of receiving this special experience, but in Dewey’s opinion this is something obtainable just about everywhere, in everyday life as well as in education. The surrounding world is continuously experienced and each one of these experiences can reach a “heightened vitality” and become *an experience*: “Even in its rudimentary forms, it contains the promise of that delightful perception which is esthetic/sic/ experience” (Dewey, 1934:19).

The present study on the use of pictures in the English language classroom in China has another aspect as well - it has to do with the schools being focused on examination scores rather than on understanding. As Pope (2001:4) expresses it, many students eventually learn how to “do studies” - going through the motions of the school mechanism rather than actually understanding the subjects. The point of education becomes questionable as the pressure to get good grades has somewhat changed the nature of learning in many places. Newton (2000: 1-2) agrees on this point: in school, good grades “may be pursued whatever the cost. Perhaps more often than many would admit, the cost is a lack of understanding.” Newton (2000:1) further claims that understanding does not always come with practical ends, like a high score on a test. He concludes that the problem is that both teachers and pupils have other priorities than actually understanding. Teachers are maybe not, depending on circumstances, “predisposed to teach for understanding” and pupils may be too focused on just getting through (Newton 2000:12).
One way to reach understanding and awaken both an interest in the subject and engagement is perhaps through aesthetical means. To Uhrmacher, integrating aesthetics into subjects is about more than the scores: “While it is possible that these practices may improve test scores, more importantly they are likely to actually engage students in subject matter” (2009:617).

“Everything,” Dewey says, “depends upon the quality of experience which is had” (Dewey, 1938:7, as cited by Uhrmacher 2009:619). One way to interpret this is that experience can help us both learn and grow as persons but it can also hinder learning, which is why the quality of teaching is so important for learners.

2.3 Six themes of aesthetical experience

In his article “Toward a Theory of Aesthetic Learning Experiences” (2009), Uhrmacher presents six “aesthetical” themes drawn from his and Dewey’s idea of an aesthetical experience. These themes are the second part of my theoretical background, and the ones guiding the reasoning in this research, together with Dewey’s theory.

“Aesthetic themes of education” (Moroye & Uhrmacher 2009) is a qualitative study about these six aesthetic themes being tried out in a class by a teacher in a middle-class suburban elementary school in the United States. Although the subject taught with the themes in this study was science and the students were much younger than the students in the present study, this study will be referred to for an increased understanding of how the themes can be incorporated into teaching.

The idea is that these themes can be used by educators in a direct way and if they apply these themes in their teaching, an aesthetical experience can be reached. The themes are the following (Moroye & Uhrmacher 2009:85-86):

- **Connections**: connect to the subject (connect through senses, emotions, knowledge, and people)
- **Imagination**: imagine possibilities—realistic and unrealistic
- **Active engagement**: participate and enjoy the experience
- **Perceptivity**: the more you look the more you see and know
- **Risk taking**: try something outside of your comfort zone
- **Sensory experience**: explore with your senses—taste touch smell sound see

In the following sections, these themes will be explained further and in some cases other relevant scholars, whose ideas resemble these themes, are also going to be referred to. In the
account of the themes, imagination will be in focus the most, since this was the main theme of the picture assignment in the present study.

2.3.1 Connections

Dewey believes that it is by our interacting with the world surrounding us, and thus connecting to it, that we make it possible to have greater aesthetical experiences. The connection we make is of both a mental and a physical nature: there are “no intrinsic psychological divisions between the intellectual and the sensory . . . the emotional and ideational; the imaginative and the practical” (Dewey 1934:247). Since Dewey did not make a distinction between different kinds of connection, Uhrmacher instead refers to Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) and their four categories of connection. When we connect, we do it on several levels – on an intellectual level, an emotional level, a communicative level and a sensory level (Uhrmacher 2009:621).

In Moroye and Uhrmacher's study (2009), the teacher, Claire, begins to apply the themes into her lesson by connecting. Her study theme being Space, she lets her students connect on the four levels suggested by Csiksznetmihalyi and Robinson through a picture collage of planets and space journeys shown together with music. Sitting there, staring and chatting, her pupils connect emotionally, sensorily and communicatively. Afterwards they spawn questions together about what they had just viewed and about space in general and enter space intellectually too. A connection to her space theme has been established (Moroye & Uhrmacher 2009:91).

2.3.2 Active engagement

Active engagement is, just like it sounds, about activity. One way of heightening the school experience is to have the class engaged in the study actively instead of passively receiving knowledge: if possible, the students should be let in charge of their learning (Moroye & Uhrmacher 2009:93-94). In Moroye and Uhrmacher's study, the teacher Claire pursued this theme by having her students make spheres in paper mache without telling the class that they were actually making planets – finding out this fact themselves engaged the pupils together with the activity itself. “I wanted them to be inquisitive and be more active about their learning, rather than get fed the answers,” the teacher explained (Moroye & Uhrmacher 2009:94).

2.3.3 Imagination

One of the many definitions of imagination in the Oxford English Dictionary is that it is an inner idea of something that is not actually present. Uhrmacher (2009) is inspired by Dewey’s ideas and also Coleridge’s (1983) work and the way the latter differentiates between
different kinds of imagination. There is the fanciful imagination; the most vivid one and the one most related to fantasy – speaking doors, flying elephants etc. This is an imagination that does not necessarily have any connection to reality, compared to imagination based on earlier experience etc. The second one Uhrmacher prefers to call intuitive imagination rather than using Coleridge’s original term primary imagination: this is the kind of imagination that authors and artists can get when for instance they feel that they have found a muse or another sudden source of imagination; it is an experience of feeling as “he/she is a conduit for a work of art to express itself.” According to Dewey, it is through working with activities one might enter an imaginative state like that (Uhrmacher 2009:624-625). Uhrmacher uses the example of Inuit woodcarvers who speak about the animal inside the wood; they appear to be able to see their creation even before they have started working on the wood (Uhrmacher 2009:625). The last kind of imagination is called secondary imagination and Uhrmacher sees it as an interactive kind. When we work with something and try out ideas we come up with new solutions and new ideas – this is the imagination from hard work (Uhrmacher 2009:626).

Liu (2009) is a strong advocate of the importance of imagination. He defines imagination as “the capacity to conceive of what is not – something that, as far as we know, does not exist; or something that may exist but we simply cannot perceive. It is the ability to conjure up new realities and possibilities” (Liu 2009:19). Liu even believes that imagination actually precedes will – even if we have the will do something, it falls flat if we do not have any ideas of how to do it, if we cannot “conceive of what does not yet exist” with our imagination, where to aim with our will (Liu 2009: 8).

Liu (2009:9-10) also tells of an enemy to imagination: path dependence. Quite often in our world “we do things the way we do them because that’s the way we do them.” This is a problem because we are stuck in our habits – we are following the same path because we are accepting it or not even thinking about it. He also claims that putting effort into teaching imagination does not have to conflict with the basic subjects in school. If anything, it will improve teaching. Imagination is not just a bonus in education; it is what “makes education relevant – to all of us” (Liu 2009:21). In this way Liu seems to agree fully with the usage of an aesthetic theme like imagination.

The importance of activity and imagination is something that Strandberg (2009), inspired by Vygotskij’s pedagogy, also advocates. He is of the opinion that it is wrong to only focus on the inner process and the students’ own thinking and development – the whole belief about inner talent and becoming smart on one’s own is something he is very skeptical about. According to
Strandberg, inner process is something that is preceded by outer processes, and it is those that make development possible. These outer ones are, he claims, activity, creativity and imagination. They let us influence ourselves and let us think in new ways (Strandberg 2009:12-14). The reason for bringing up Strandberg is that although Strandberg is not referring exactly to these themes, he also believes that there is a way to reach an inner process and true development through these aspects that agree with the themes – activity, imagination and creativity – which are also what may lead to an aesthetical experience. In that respect, his viewpoint is in agreement with Uhrmacher’s.

Echoing Vygotskij, Strandberg (2009: 99-110) also says that creative activities ought to be a part of teaching for those very reasons; imagination and creativity are parts that need development as much as the subjects in school. In the adult world, imagination is often believed to disagree with or even oppose reality. But children in school should combine the two for enhanced learning.

2.3.4 Perceptivity

Moroye and Uhrmacher (2009:94-95) defines perceptivity to be about taking time to really look at something rather than merely recognizing, perceiving something in depth. They explain this by saying that “it is one thing to recall that a castle is a fortress; it is quite another to understand what makes the structure sturdy enough to act as a fortress” (2009:96). In Uhrmacher’s study Clare gives her class ice cream and this gesture is not only a kind treat. While the pupils are eating the ice cream, she encourages them to speak aloud about how they experience the ice cream – its taste, form and how it looks etc. By being perceptive, the pupils “were both conscious about the activity and reflective about it” (Uhrmacher 2009:628).

2.3.5 Sensory experience

Uhrmacher (2009:623) states that an aesthetical experience is a sensory experience, and as such, using one’s senses is important in education in order to get an aesthetic experience. Since many of the themes are sensory this might not seem to add much, but in my understanding the key could be to employ as many senses as possible in order to make the experience aesthetical.

2.3.6 Risk taking

As put by Moroye and Uhrmacher (2009:94), risk taking is about “venturing into the unknown.” What could be considered as a “risk” might be different for each student but the theme of risk-taking means doing something that you are not entirely comfortable with or sure about (Moroye & Uhrmacher 2009:94-95); by facing it or ideally by overcoming it, it can
lead to an aesthetical experience. In Uhrmacher’s study, Claire had students make spheres with the papier maché method – getting sticky from all the glue when doing this could be counted as a low risk-taking (Moroye & Uhrmacher 2009:94).

2.4 Empirical studies of the use of aesthetical tools

Below, different studies of some tools and their findings (even if they are open to further empirical research) will be presented. Since this study uses pictures, the studies presented here are about the use of picture books and comics. In the discussion section it will be discussed whether these findings and arguments hold for this study’s picture assignment as well. Other examples of aesthetical resources could be music, games, multimedia like movies and power point collages and theatre/drama or outdoor/indoor activities etc. However, these resources are not within the scope of the present study.

In order to find out the educational benefits of using picture books, Sheu (2003) interviewed ten teachers who had a vast experience of using them when teaching children in primary school in Taiwan. The findings could be categorized as a linguistic value, a story value and finally the picture value. Some of the interviewed teachers were of the opinion that due to the broad context of the books, the students could learn to use English words in various situations. The majority also made a point of how picture books could make the reviewing of new words as well as sentences become easier thanks to the meaningful context (Sheu 2003:49). They saw benefits concerning the stories of the books as well, with one teacher answering that “A good story will always attract students”; another teacher wished to motivate her students through the stories of the picture books. Additionally, having stories that the Chinese students could easily connect to made it easier to follow the books and understand the English in them (Sheu 2003:49-50). All the ten interviewed teachers agreed that the main point with using pictures in a language classroom was that they could stimulate the students’ imagination, and that it made it easier for the students to comprehend the stories. Another interesting notion was that the teachers also believed that the pictures in the books allowed the students “to make their own interpretations” as they read (Sheu 2003:51-52, 54).

Kunai (2007) studied the use of manga\(^1\) as a teaching tool in an EFL (English as a foreign language) context. One of his points is that even though ordinary textbooks are good for learning, they tend to be both “too formal or old-fashioned and rarely used in daily life,” while manga often reflects our everyday lives in its story as well as in its language (even

\(^1\) Manga: A comic style originating from Japan (Kunai 2007).
though most manga stories are set in a Japanese context, many aspects of everyday life brought up in these stories are the same elsewhere too. Kunai also believes that the vast range of genres in manga books (from superheroes to cooking) makes it possible for anyone to find something in his/her interest. Compared to textbooks and other literature manga also brings “little fear, pressure or anxiety”, which makes it suitable for reluctant readers in need of a push (Kunai 2007:3-6).

Drolet (2010:135) in his study on the use of comics for improving EFL reading and writing skills stresses the benefit of everyday language. He concludes that using comics is not only engaging but they are also a source of “real-life language that is often missing from the classroom.”

Yang (2003) is a high school teacher and cartoonist who has studied comics as an educational device. Going through reports, the works of others, and different statistics, he has identified and defined five strengths with the use of comics in education:

1) Comics can help to motivate the students.
2) Being a visual medium, comics can let students connect more easily.
3) Comics are permanent, meaning that compared to a movie or a lecture held by a teacher, the students can read at their own pace.
4) Comics have the benefit of being intermediate – they have often been used as a staircase to more studies of more difficulty, for instance as a warm up to create reading interest before heavier literature.
5) Comics are part of the popular culture in many countries and it is a way to reach students.

The findings and claims of the different studies presented in this section will be taken into consideration as the results of this present study are discussed.

3. Methods

This study was done in order to see the impact of a picture assignment in a Chinese high school class on the students’ attitudes to the task, and compare the findings with earlier findings on the benefits of aesthetical tools. Before this experiment, a pilot study was undertaken, in order to learn about various possibilities (how much time of the teacher’s schedule could be used etc.) and also to make sure the informants would consent to participate. The class and the teacher had not experienced this kind of picture assignment before. The English classes were very content-heavy in order to help the students pass written examinations. Because of this there was a much greater focus on writing, reading and grammar than on speaking. The choice of school in this study was partly because of convenience, but also because it was a chance to try out the study in new grounds: both the
country and the age of the subjects differ from previous studies on the use of aesthetical tools in language learning.

3.1 Research design

The present study is a qualitative and explorative case study based on the previously presented set of research questions: the impact of aesthetical tools on language learning as well as its usefulness in language teaching.

The target group in the study was a high school class and their teacher. The students received a picture assignment made solely for this study, and their attitudes towards the task’s usefulness as well as the students’ enjoyment and interest were investigated through a questionnaire (Appendix 1). The teacher provided the answers to the second main research question in an interview – he was asked about his opinion concerning the picture assignment used in class and about pictures in general, as well as how engaging students find it when pictures are used. The independent variable was the picture assignment and the dependent variables were the attitudes amongst students and their teacher. The case studied was the impact of the aesthetical tool pictures in order to determine the effects this might have. The design is called explorative because this study is not looking for a single detailed answer that can be generalized in any way – instead the interest of this study lies in looking at the attitudes in a qualitative way and maybe discover more about benefits or issues concerning the impact of pictures. The main focus is student interest, engagement, enjoyment and usefulness, and the qualitative data obtained from the “why” questions in the questionnaire and the interview with the teacher are rather explorative in nature.

3.2 Procedure

Before the material was collected, I visited the school order to get to know the class and to get a chance to speak with the English teacher. The picture assignment was shown, and the questionnaire was discussed with the teacher and his assistant regarding its design and whether it would be understood by the class, language wise, since the two of them knew the English level of the class. After we had made sure the questionnaire was simple enough, both picture assignment and questionnaire were given to the students in the teacher’s English class as homework and were returned to the teacher the next day. After I collected the material, an interview with the teacher was held.
3.3 Subjects

A Chinese high school class consisting of 60 students between 13-14 years of age and mixed genders consented to participate in this study. A Chinese English teacher agreed to first let me come and observe his English class, and later to let me do my experiment with his students. A teacher-trainee, serving as an assistant in his class, also participated in the pilot study. The choice of school for the study, the “case” being explored, was not a random decision. Having no contact with Chinese schools, I turned to my supervisor for help and she found a high school that agreed to let me come. The teacher in the study is a teacher who volunteered to help after a presentation of the study. The class mentioned above was his class.

3.4 Ethical considerations

The school where this experiment was conducted was contacted by my supervisor and a meeting was arranged with a Chinese teacher at the school. After explaining the research, its specific goals and in what way the teacher’s help was needed, I asked the teacher once more if he would like to participate in the study. After consenting, he helped out by asking the class for their consent to participate and described my research to them in Chinese. Apart from mentioning the country where the study was done and age of the students, the names of the teacher and the participating class were kept confidential throughout the study and in the results. The interview was recorded with the permission of the interviewee.

3.5 Data instruments

A picture assignment was made for the study to serve as the aesthetical tool picture in the experiment (see App. 2). It was a two-paged comic strip and the students were asked to complete the comic strip by filling in the empty speech bubbles. The purpose of the task was basically to let the students imagine freely while using their English to write a coherent dialog. A limitation of the experiment was that the class had a very tight schedule and I could not expect to get much time with my subjects; the assignment was shortened drastically because of this and this in turn is a limitation I am very well aware of. It is hard to give one’s opinion of something with such a brief experience of it.

A rather simple questionnaire consisting of six items (see Appendix 1) was also made to measure the subjects’ attitudes towards the picture assignment, according to the research questions stated. To keep it simple and not time consuming, five items were yes/no questions and two of these were followed by an optional “why”-question. The last item was a question asking if they had any other comments. This questionnaire, like the picture assignment, was
made for this study and had not been used before. Since the level of the students’ English in this class was moderate, the words and language used was discussed with the teacher to ensure that the students could understand the questions asked in the questionnaire. A limitation was that the questionnaire was written in English and that the students had to answer in English because of my own very limited Chinese, and I could not expect a translator to help me with such a large number of answers. This may have hindered the students from expressing themselves fully. Also worth mentioning is that even if it was emphasized that the subjects should state their opinions freely, the subjects may very well have answered positively in order to be polite to the researcher. This is, however, a limitation all studies such as this cannot evade fully.

Other instruments used were a semi-structured, recorded interview and an observation in the pilot study for the purpose of finding out whether this kind of exercise had been used earlier or not. The observation was used for a pilot study only and is not used to answer the research questions. The interview had a few questions which were prepared in advance, serving as guidelines, but the idea was to let the teacher add as much of his thoughts as possible.

### 3.6 Data collection

Three instruments – the assignment using pictures, the questionnaire and the interview with a high school teacher – are what provided the data used in this study. The teacher preferred my picture assignment to be given as homework rather than taking time from the class, since they were busy, and it was done accordingly. In a way this was a good thing since the students might have been able to spend more time on it, but having them do it in class would perhaps have been more ideal as it cannot be ensured that the picture assignment was not done by others or that the students were not helped by others. But since the objective with this experiment was to find out their attitudes rather than their English skills, this does not have to be such a big problem. The questionnaires were handed out at the same time, and 57 of them were returned to the teacher the next day for me to collect. Three questionnaires were not returned. The need for sincere answers and that the information was only for the purpose of my research was emphasized when the questionnaires were distributed in class.

The interview was slightly disturbed because of the following elements: The teacher did not have access to an office and we could not speak in private at the time he agreed to have the interview – instead it was held in the teachers’ room. It was not a perfect place for an interview but the teacher’s wishes were followed. The teacher did not mind having the interview recorded, and it lasted about 20 minutes.
3.7 Data analysis

The analysis began by checking the answers on the questionnaire used to find out the students’ attitudes in order to be able to quantify my data. Second, conceptual categories for the qualitative data in the questionnaire, i.e., the students’ replies to the questions as to “why” the picture assignment was interesting/felt different (items 2 and 3) as well as the “any other comments” alternative at the end (see App. 1) were created. In Appendix 3, each opinion in a conceptual category is followed by the number of subjects sharing it, and for simplification the answers to each question were sorted in positive versus negative opinions (positive above the line and negative beneath it). The conceptual categories were created by putting very similar opinions together in order to better see the general attitudes, and are presented in the results section below.

4. Analysis and results

In this section the data, the questionnaires and the interview, will be analyzed to answer the research questions. A comparison with previous empirical studies will also be made.

4.1 What impact does the use of aesthetical tools have on language learning?

The first research question was about finding out the students’ attitudes to the use of pictures in the English language classroom. The questionnaire results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Students’ attitudes to the use of pictures in English language learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did you enjoy the exercise?</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was it interesting?</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did it feel any different compared to the usual lesson content?</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think it is helpful for learning English?</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you like more exercises of this kind?</td>
<td>44*</td>
<td>12*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* one student left this item blank

As Table 1 shows, the majority of the students were positive to the assignment. 53 out of 57 found it enjoyable, 49 believed it was helpful and 50 out of 57 subjects found the picture assignment interesting. According to this, pictures seem to serve as a tool to increase interest
in English. However, such a short assignment tried out once does not prove much in itself – it could for instance be due to its novelty; when asked why it was interesting, six students pointed out that they found it “different”, “new” and that “there are no stories in the usual lessons.” However, novelty, if this is the reason for the positive reactions, is a strength rather than a weakness: using aesthetical tools in teaching English can make the lessons more varied, since there are multiple tools one could put to good use, not only comics such as the one in this study.

In order to make the following discussion easier to follow, a summary of the conceptual categories is included in Table 2, presenting the results of the second part of the questionnaire (items 2, 3 and the “why” question). The opinions of the subjects have also been divided into two categories: *positive reactions* versus *criticism*.

Table 2. Summary of the conceptual categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Reactions:</th>
<th>Criticism:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nice pictures and story 22</td>
<td>Bad pictures and story 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was more interesting than the usual lessons 19</td>
<td>It was not fun 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was fun 12</td>
<td>Much exams to do, no time for this 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was new 6</td>
<td>Strange 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relax myself 4</td>
<td>The usual lessons has more points 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different 3</td>
<td>For children 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liked this way to learn 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The comic was too short 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to enjoy myself 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exciting 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good for English 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help us have a good mind 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let us imagine 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We can write what we want 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are no stories in the usual lessons 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The story tells something 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We make it by ourselves 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second subordinate research question about the impact of aesthetical tools in language learning was about whether the students find the use of pictures enjoyable and useful or not. Apparently, almost everyone enjoyed it, but why and how can be discussed quite much based on the many opinions presented in Table 2. The most common reason seems to be that they enjoyed the pictures and story (22 students said so). One student said “the story tells
something,” and the assignment was found exciting, different, special etc.; in other words, it had a positive impact on them. Something else that might be the reason they found the task both enjoyable and useful is the freedom of writing and thinking in the assignment compared to their traditional lessons. Even if put a bit differently, this is mentioned by many: some students have pointed out that 1) we can write what we want 2) it lets us imagine 3) we make it by ourselves 4) it is creative. Another thing that made it enjoyable for four students was that it gave them an opportunity to relax. Twelve students wrote that it was fun, three liked this way of learning and 44 out of 56 (one reply is missing) answered that they would like more exercises of this kind: I believe this is due to the use of pictures, the story and the freedom of making it themselves. Concerning its usefulness, two students wrote outright that it was “good for English” and another two pointed out that “it helps us have a good mind” and 49 out of 57 thought it was helpful for learning English. It did seem to have more weight in the enjoyment section though.

The third subordinate research question asked if the use of pictures can lead to an increased interest in the subject English. According to the answers in Table 1, the use of pictures seems to be able to increase the students’ interest in the English subject. However, what made the picture assignment enjoyable might be the type of task given, meaning it does not necessarily have to be the pictures that led to an increase in interest, but instead the story, or the fact that they could write more freely compared to what they are used to. But as an aesthetical tool, it can be said that it indeed led to an increase in interest in the subject English.

The picture assignment seemed to be able to incorporate some of the six aesthetical themes suggested by Uhrmacher (2009), judging from the answers. Most of all, the imagination theme appears to have been present: the empty speech bubbles and the pictures pushed the students to think and imagine for themselves and this was appreciated. Strandberg (2006) claims that the inner process of learning is preceded by activity, imagination and creativity. If students can become creative in their writing and look up new words I can see how the activity of using them in an imagined story may help them to learn and understand the new words in a context. This is one way to relate Strandberg’s ideas to my experiment. The way in which many students found the assignment new, different and freer than their usual assignments can be related to the path dependence presented by Liu (2007). Maybe sometimes letting the students imagine freely like this can be habit-breaking: if we always study in the same manner because we always have, imagination will likely suffer.

The theme active engagement can also be applied in this study. Moroye and Uhrmacher (2009) say that if possible, the students should be let in charge of their learning. This
assignment lets the students make the story themselves and choose what to write and which words to use. In order to come up with a coherent story the students had to look closely at the pictures first and find the context. They had to be perceptive about it and thus the theme of perceptivity can be counted in to some extent. Even the theme connections may have been incorporated: looking at the pictures in the comic strip the students can emotionally connect to the boy’s surprise and frustration, and there could also be a knowledge connection – “cats do not speak, what is going on?” It was also a sensory experience since the assignment was visual with its pictures.

It is also worth noting that although the majority appreciated it, a few did not. It should be added that the number of discontent students seems higher than it actually was in the conceptual categories presented in Table 2, where twelve opinions of critique are expressed: the actual number of students who were critical only counted six. But even so, the fact is that a few were discontent, and this will be addressed. Their opinion was that it was not fun, the story and pictures were bad and one even wrote “We’re not the little kids! We didn’t enjoy the stories anymore!” Another reason for their discontent seemed to be stress – one student wrote that they did not have time for this (my study intervened with other homework and exams). The reason this is brought up is that for the student who quite aggressively criticized the assignment, this aesthetical tool did not work as intended at all – with such an attitude it will be neither interesting nor enjoyable. This shortcoming could be handled by letting the students who dislike the tool instead work more traditionally – i.e. they can be given a choice. Aesthetical tools can be seen as more of a complement to teaching (to incorporate imagination, motivation etc. into the lessons). As a teacher trainee I have had the chance to try out similar exercises in upper secondary school before, and pictures were used as a starting up exercise in one case and as a long writing exercise in another – but in all cases traditional textbooks and grammar exercises etc. were kept as well, having them complement one another.

4.2 What impact does the use of aesthetical tools have on language teaching?

The first subordinate research question in the second set of questions was to find out what benefits/weaknesses the teacher could see with the use of pictures in English teaching. The teacher was positive about the idea of a picture assignment like the one used in the present study, but he was cautious and saw both benefits and disadvantages. First of all, he believed in its engaging and motivating value, saying “I think it is really good, because it can make my students become more and more interested in English.” But, he pondered, in the English classes in China right now, spoken English practice is what is needed the most. “Here in
China, most students like doing grammar, but they need more time to practice spoken English.” Things being so, an assignment focused on writing such as this one was in his eyes maybe not ideal.

Considering this, he suggested using this type of picture assignment as a base for discussion instead: “You could use one picture to lead them to talk in English, to talk about the ideas about the pictures orally.” He also said, concerning the story: “But maybe using a whole story is a little waste of time because different people have different ideas. Sometimes it is not very easy for the teacher to control the whole class; after all we have so many students in the same class.”

Another benefit he brought up is about the students’ being able to connect to comics, followed by a cautionary remark: “They are teenagers. They are interested in cartoons... in comics but our customs - but it is different from our customs. Maybe yours isn’t the best choice in China. Maybe you should learn Chinese customs first, and you can make it match.” This is certainly useful critique; the power of stories and pictures is that you can match them with a country’s culture and customs to make it easier to comprehend for the students, even if it is a foreign language they are dealing with. He also said, when talking about creativity, that “there should be a balance. Knowledge is very important to pass all the examinations.”

Passing the examinations is of course a priority in most if not all schools, especially at the place where my study was carried out. However, as brought up in the theoretical background, according to Pope (2004) and Newton (2000), examination scores can be of more weight than understanding. Maybe a balance between traditional teaching and aesthetical teaching could let understanding be in focus, instead of being a secondary thing.

The second research question in the second set is whether pictures can be a way of making the students more engaged in the teacher’s opinion. The interviewee believes pictures can indeed be engaging. He used a picture of aliens once as a background theme, saying “it’s just a background to talk about” and he likes multimedia. In his own case, he mostly uses multimedia for introductory means while he keeps the lessons traditional. He believes using one or two pictures to speak about would be good: “I just lead them to speak about what will happen then?” Then, looking at the assignments finished by his students he says, “But I think their writing is very beautiful. They can speak about the pictures very happily because they think they can use very informal English, not only formal.” The story is set in an informal context, thanks to it being a comic strip, and being able to use informal English might be engaging. Continuing, he said ”I think the idea is good and the students like pictures more and more and they will want you to make it longer and longer.”
The possibility to use everyday language as a benefit of comics mentioned by both Kunai (2007) and Drolet (2010) was repeated by the teacher, as the quotes from the interview demonstrate. When looking at the turned in assignments one could definitely see how the students used informal (sometimes very informal) language quite happily. According to my experience from speaking to both schoolmates and teachers and from having studied a while in China, many excel at grammar and know many complex words and sentences, while their knowledge of informal language is slight. Comic assignments such as this could fill the informal language gap that appears to exist. But this is for another researcher to go further into.

4.3 Comparing findings

From a study on picture books and English language learning, Sheu (2003) found three values (linguistic, story and picture). The linguistic value, being about learning new words in the broad context of the books, cannot be compared to my assignment as I do not have the means to tell if the subjects used new words or not in the task they handed in. However, a student recommended adding a list of key words to the assignments that the students could use – a way to learn new words in the story context of the assignment. The story value means that a story lets the readers connect and more easily understand English and that a good story attracts students. But since the picture books were used for a reading assignment in Sheu’s study, and not a writing assignment as in the present study, this too cannot be compared. According to the survey, however, the majority of the subjects liked the pictures and the story. Most of all, the picture value appeared in the assignment. The opinion shared by all interviewees in Sheu’s study was that pictures can stimulate the imagination and make comprehension of the story easier – the latter is of more interest when reading, but the first point about stimulating the imagination is what the task in the present experiment is all about. Since a large number (22 subjects) expressed an interest in the picture story and wrote comments like we can write what we want (2), the story tells something (1), we make it by ourselves (1), let us imagine (2) etc., this power of pictures appears to work in this assignment as well. The interviewees also pointed out that the pictures let the students make their own interpretations. Looking over the handed in assignments, this is corroborated. They varied greatly; in some versions the cat was in fact a dog, or even an invading species of aliens.
In section 2.3, five strengths of using comics in education according to Yang (2003) on his website humblecomics were also mentioned.² I will discuss at some length whether they hold true for this assignment or not, according to the questionnaire answers. The first point is that comics can help to motivate, and this claim is in agreement with the students’ opinions; the majority answered that they enjoyed the exercise (53/57) and that they found it interesting (50/57). The definition of motivation will not be discussed, but having an interest in and enjoying something ought to be motivating, as is the fact that 44 out of 57 would like more exercises of the same kind. Another strength is that comics are permanent compared to for instance a teacher’s verbal teaching. Thanks to this, the students can go over a comic strip at their own preferred pace and go back and forth as much as they want – something which is true for books as well. That some students found my assignment “relaxing” may be thanks to it being permanent: they could imagine and fill in the speech bubbles at their own pace. Yang (2003) also says that a third strength of comics is that they are intermediate. Since the students decide what to write and how, they may pick their own level of English by using sentences and words on a level they can manage. Of course, a drawback with this is that just as the students can challenge themselves, they can also choose to take an easier route. But in another respect, this kind of assignment can be used with all levels of English learners which can be an advantage. Finally, Yang (2003) pointed out that comics are part of the popular culture, and students have a connection to it. The interviewed teacher believes in this strength too.

A last topic to bring up about aesthetical tools is the possibility that they can help different groups of students. As the focus of this paper is English language learning, this will only be discussed briefly, since it is more about teaching in a general sense.

In their article “Comic Strip Conversations,” Glaeser, et al. (2003) write about a student with autism and a foreign student who both had a hard time with English language learning. The project in the “Comic Strip Conversations” was to use comic strips as a way to let the students better understand and learn to deal with social situations. The student with autism who had previously evaded facing problems in her surroundings learnt to express herself and think her actions through and the foreign student was encouraged to use more English. In both cases, the teacher had found a way to reach these children in a way that was not possible before – through comic strips (Glaeser et al. 2003:15). In addition, Glaeser et al. (2003:16-19) believe the comic strip tool could be applicable to all with limited language abilities or similar hindrances. Zimmerman (2008), creator of the free educational and comic-based

² http://www.humblecomics.com/comicsedu/strengths.html
website MakeBeliefsComix³, brings this up as well. Apart from children with autism, comic strips can be of great help to those who have learning issues, those who are deaf and people who are traumatized in different ways. Comics can help them to “understand concepts and to communicate” (Zimmerman 2008:56). Aesthetical tools can thus be used when traditional teaching does not fully reach a student, for one reason or another. But as mentioned earlier, it does not have to be one or the other – by contrast, teaching through aesthetical tools and traditional means together might be the best. As the teacher in my interview said, a balance is needed. People like Pope (2004) can question today’s school teaching where scores may become too important, but this is a fact that will not easily change, especially in a country like China where the competition is tough and scores may determine not only the student’s but his/her family’s future as well. The knowledge demand will not disappear anytime soon, even if teaching for understanding is ideal.

5. Conclusion

The main aim of the present study was to find out about attitudes to the aesthetical tool pictures in the English language classroom. According to the survey, the results are in favor of using aesthetical tools in the English language classroom: the students were positive towards the assignment by a vast majority, with only a small part being against it. The informants found it both enjoyable and useful even if the comments are mostly about how they enjoyed and liked it rather than about its usefulness. It also appears to increase interest in the subject judging from the replies. The interview with the teacher gave similar answers but with more caution. The implications can be summarized as follows. First of all, aesthetical tools such as this are unusual in the country where this study was carried out. Second, when pictures are used they are mainly used for introductions and sometimes to start a discussion; hence, it is a secondary tool at most. Still, bringing different kinds of aesthetical tools into the traditional teaching holds great potential as something to complement what is missing in an ordinary classroom experience. Just as in the study done by Sheu (2003) the picture and story value in the present study is about more than English learning in itself. As pointed out above, this was an explorative study. Next is to find out more about this balance and determine whether aesthetical tools really improve language learning and if the benefits mentioned above hold true over a longer period and with a larger number of subjects. With results such as these with 57 subjects, there seems to be potential in aesthetical tools in education and more specifically, in English language learning.

³ http://www.makebeliefscomix.com
5.1 Suggestions for future studies

One of this study’s main limitations has been the lack of previous studies in the same age group as those in the present study. More studies in older age groups (high school etc.) would be required, maybe investigating how aesthetical tools can be adapted to English language classes on a higher level. It is probably obvious to the reader that the way in which Claire used the aesthetical themes in Uhrmacher’s study might not be the first choice in a high school class. Informal versus formal language in English language teaching and the possible role aesthetical tools may have in it is also something worth recommending as an area for future studies; not only the benefits of aesthetical tools in teaching in general but as a way to introduce informal language into teaching etc. Last of all, the topic about reaching learners with difficulties mentioned above and the role of aesthetical tools for doing so is also an area for interested researchers to go further into: finding ways to help students with difficulties that work is of utmost importance in all education.
References


Appendix 1. Questionnaire for the students.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Age:____. Sex:____. Grade:_____.

Please tick off your choices and answer the following questions. Your information will be kept as a secret and the data will be collected anonymously. Thanks for your cooperation.

1. Did you enjoy the exercise?
   A. YES. B. NO.

2. Was it interesting?
   A. YES. B. NO.
   Why?

3. Did it feel any different compared to the usual lesson content?
   A. YES. B. NO.
   Why?

4. Do you think it is helpful for learning English?
   A. YES. B. NO.

5. Would you like more exercises of this kind?
   A. YES. B. NO.

6. Any other comments:

   ____________________________________________________________

   Thank you for your sincere answers and valuable help!
Appendix 2. Picture Assignment
### Appendix 3. Conceptual Categories

Table 3. Conceptual categories on the qualitative comments from the questionnaire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why was it interesting?</th>
<th>Why was it different?</th>
<th>Any other comments?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beautiful pictures 9</td>
<td>Books are boring, but this is interesting 16</td>
<td>Make the story longer 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun 8</td>
<td>Interesting 6</td>
<td>Would like keywords 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting 5</td>
<td>No exercise like this 3</td>
<td>Add something more to the story 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like the story 5</td>
<td>Always listen and write 2</td>
<td>Because you make the story yourself 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cute cat 4</td>
<td>It’s different 2</td>
<td>Helpful for English, we can learn in a fun time 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is new 4</td>
<td>Funnier 2</td>
<td>Good, interesting, funny 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting boy and cat 3</td>
<td>More creative 2</td>
<td>Great, we can learn a lot 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can relax 2</td>
<td>Relaxing 2</td>
<td>Loves to imagine pictures 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cat can talk 2</td>
<td>We make it by ourselves 2</td>
<td>Really enjoyed it 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it was different 1</td>
<td>Better pictures 1</td>
<td>Want more conversations and more roles 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can enjoy myself 1</td>
<td>Books are boring 1</td>
<td>______________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can make us happy 1</td>
<td>Can imagine anything 1</td>
<td>A little strange 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exciting situation 1</td>
<td>Can make our minds quicker 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hand no exercise like this 1</td>
<td>Cat like this 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful for study 1</td>
<td>Good for English 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps us have a good mind 1</td>
<td>Improves spoken English 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting moods 1</td>
<td>Learn knowledge and the story tells something 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like this way to learn 1</td>
<td>Lessons are boring 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes me laugh 1</td>
<td>Lessons have no stories 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special pictures 1</td>
<td>Never seen a Lessons have no stories 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special story 1</td>
<td>Open and enjoyable 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We can write what we want 1</td>
<td>Ordinary lessons increase memory 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The book teaches more 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We can learn from the story 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We can think more 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The story is boring 3</td>
<td>Usual lessons have more points 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awful cat 1</td>
<td>More pictures and uglier 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boring and ugly pictures 1</td>
<td>Very strange 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No time for this 1</td>
<td>We are not kids 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why was it interesting?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>______________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

27