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Ekphrastic Poetry in the Second Language Classroom

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Introduction

What is ekphrasis, and why introduce it in the second language classroom? This was the question that I posed to myself upon learning of ekphrastic poetry. If your students are anything like mine, their reaction to poetry may be one of intimidation, they might feel lost or quite possibly inept; most poetry seems mysterious to them. Now add into the mix poetry in another language, a language in which a great deal of the vocabulary is unfamiliar to them. Approaching a poem in the second language may seem quite daunting, almost impossible for first or second year language learners. Ekphrastic poetry can ease the introduction of poetry in the target language to students by providing a means for them to enter into a poem, very similar to reading illustrated nursery rhymes as a child. Provided with the visual, the language learner begins to believe that understanding the poem at a very basic level is possible. Poetry written in response to a work of art invites discussion about the components of the poem, its structure and its function and for language learners it provides plenty of opportunity for growth in and practice using the target language vocabulary aurally, verbally, and written. In this unit I strive to demystify target language poetry for my students through the study of the poem “Catrina,” by Xánath Caraza written in response to La Calavera Catrina in Diego Rivera’s mural “Sueno de una Tarde Dominical en la Alameda.”

Background

I currently teach at John Dickinson High School in Wilmington, Delaware in the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme, which has been in existence for three years. The middle school is located within the high school building in a wing of its own and was created as an extension to the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme for grades 11 and 12. The Diploma Programme was initiated at Dickinson five years prior to the inception of the Middle Years Programme (MYP). MYP was implemented to encourage more students to participate in the Diploma Programme. In its first year, MYP included grades six, seven, eight and this year will be expanding to include grade ten. A continuous sixth through twelfth grade International Baccalaureate Programme will be established at Dickinson in the near future. Our Middle Years Programme will be growing in size this coming school year from about 240 students to the maximum of 300.

Students must apply to participate in MYP. To be eligible, students must be on grade level in both Reading and Math, and must be motivated to learn. I am currently the only Spanish teacher in MYP teaching Spanish 1A (Grade 6), Spanish 1B (Grade 7), and Spanish 2 (Grade 8), meeting with my classes for forty-five minutes every day.

Open-mindedness is one of the ten attributes included in the IB Learner Profile. To be considered open-minded students, “critically appreciate our own cultures and personal histories, as well as the values and traditions of others. We seek and evaluate a range of points of view, and we are willing to grow from the experience.”¹ Our school population is pretty diverse but the students typically have a shallow understanding of various cultures not only around the world, but also close to home. They need opportunities to immerse themselves culturally in order to appreciate the similarities in our human experiences that on the surface appear to be different. My plan is to use authentic Spanish language texts and Hispanic visual works of art to present students with opportunities to immerse themselves in the Hispanic culture using authentic target language literature accompanied by a culture rich painting. It is my intention to incorporate ekphrastic poetry into this unit so that students can have exposure to Hispanic culture through the personal experiences of native speakers as told in their native tongue. Authentic literature exposes students to culture through the experiences of the author/speaker because the words the poet uses “refer to common experience,” expressing facts, ideas or events referring to certain knowledge about the world that others share. Words also reflect the poet’s beliefs, attitudes, and point of view and those of her/his culture. “Language expresses cultural reality.”²

Incorporating ekphrastic poetry in the target language not only enriches students’ vocabulary in the target language but it increases their understanding of the target language culture(s). Poetry is an integral component of any culture. Poems express the distinctive culture and worldview of the people from where they originated. In the article entitled *Multicultural Moments in Poetry: The Importance of the Unique*, David Hanauer points out that poetry affords the language learner entrance into a multileveled socio-cultural linguistic experience; therefore, including poetry in the second language classroom aids educators in teaching multiculturalism.³ There is value in the second language classroom that can arise from incorporating authentic target language poetry in order to increase student understanding of the target language culture(s).

Content Objectives

I am focused on three goals in the creation of this unit. First, I would like my students to gain a cultural appreciation and understanding of poetry written in the target language authored by a native speaker of the language. I plan to incorporate an ekphrastic poem written by Xanath Caraza in response to the mural created by Mexican artist Diego Rivera, “Sueno de una Tarde Dominical en la Alameda” to allow the students to delve deeper into the cultural significance of each work.

Second, I would like the students to be risk-takers in their approach to learning. Delving into literature in the target language for first and second year students of the language will seem quite daunting and almost impossible initially. Hence a visual, the work of art, to accompany the poem can be a useful tool for teaching beginning language students, especially those who are visual learners. A visual work of art can clarify meaning and may be a tension diffuser. It is my hope that with the use of a visual, the students will explore the literature in depth, spurring them on to make deeper cultural connections.

Third, I would like students to develop their individual ways of self-expression and self-realization in the target language with poetry and the use of poetic devices. Writing one's feelings and emotions in the target language can appear to be nearly impossible for first and second year students, especially early on in the process. Using ekphrastic poetry as a means of expression makes this task less daunting as the work of art is the point of focus and the visual provides opportunity for a plethora of target language vocabulary.

Background Content

Student Background Knowledge

During the year of Spanish prior to this unit, students completed an eight week unit of study on the Mexican celebration of El Día de los Muertos (The Day of the Dead) in which they learned about the significance of calaveras, edible or decorative skulls used during the Day of the Dead, and limited details about La Calavera Catrina, Mexico's "Grande Dame of Death," created by José Guadalupe Posada. Also in this unit, students were exposed to Calaveras poems, which are poems recited for the Day of the Dead. These are satirical poems that poke fun at people who are alive in such a way as to suggest they are dead. The people being satirized are in the public eye, often politicians and people of power. Calaveras poems are an accepted and safe way to make fun of the rich and powerful. These poems also point out that in the end we all end up in the same place. These satires can also be found in the form of illustrations incorporating skulls, thus the name Calaveras. In this unit, my students had the opportunity to create their own Calaveras poems about a famous individual or a family member. As background knowledge for this unit, students completed a brief study of the Mexican Revolution.

Key Content

Definition of Ekphrastic Poetry

I believe it helpful to understand the concept of ekphrasis. In addition to understanding the concept, it is also essential to understand the intention of the poet. These understandings will allow you to develop a framework of skills necessary for teaching ekphrastic work. The simple

definition of ekphrasis is "a written piece in response to a work of art." According to the Poetry Foundation, "An ekphrastic poem is a vivid description of a scene or, more commonly, a work of art. Through the imaginative act of narrating and reflecting on the "action" of a painting or sculpture, the poet may amplify and expand its meaning."⁴ However, there exist various types of ekphrasis, along with multiple approaches, and purposes (objectives) for this kind of writing.

As I learned in the seminar led by Paul H. Fry, entitled "Poems about Works of Art, Featuring Women and other Marginalized Writers," there are three types of ekphrastic poetry: notional ekphrasis, actual ekphrasis, and unaccess[i]ble actual ekphrasis. Notional ekphrasis is literature based upon an imagined work of art. An excellent example of this type of ekphrasis is "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by the romantic poet John Keats. The

urn in Keats's poem cannot be found anywhere other than in his imagination. Actual ekphrasis is a written response to a piece of art that we can find and view. One such work that we studied in seminar was "Musee de Beaux Arts" by W. H. Auden written in response to Pieter Brueghel's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" in which the writer describes for us a specific moment in time showing the indifference of others to the suffering of another individual, of inconsequence to them. The fall of Icarus is the tragedy of this work, he having flown too close to the sun and melted his waxen wings. Unaccess[i]ble actual ekphrasis is literature written in response to a work to which we do not have access, perhaps because it is lost. Any one of these forms of ekphrasis can be an effective tool used to introduce poetry to students.

Actual ekphrasis is the most obvious choice for me, as a Language Acquisition teacher, because I anticipate that my students will struggle with comprehension of the poem in the target language. This variation of ekphrasis will provide a clear frame of reference and provides an entry into the poem. Reading and comprehending literary works in Spanish are intimidating enough for my eighth grade students, even more so when that literary work is a poem. Introducing Spanish poetry through ekphrasis will allow my students to seek out lines in the poem that refer to the work of art and from there they can begin to piece together its meaning along with the poet's intent.

La Calavera Catrina

José Guadalupe Posada, the creator of La Catrina, is one of Mexico's most famous political printmakers and engravers. His work influenced artists throughout Latin America because of its satirical nature and social engagement. He used calaveras, skulls, and bones to pursue political and critical analyses. La Catrina, Figure 1, is Posada's most famous calavera and is arguably Mexico's quintessential image of death.



Figure 1 *La Catrina* by José Guadalupe Posada

The use of the skull in political satire emerged in Mexico during the early 1900s, around the time of the Mexican Revolution. Posada received his inspiration for *La Calavera Catrina* from Aztec mythology, specifically from the deity Mictecacihuatl, goddess of death, and Lady of Mitlan, who along side her husband ruled the underworld. According to Aztec mythology, she was the keeper of bones in the underworld and presided over the month-long celebrations honoring the dead.⁵ The original depiction of Posada's *Catrina* was *La Calavera Garbancera*. *Garbancera* derived from the garbanzo sellers, who, being poor, pretended to be rich and wanted to hide their indigenous roots. This group of merchants pretended to have the lifestyle of Europeans. As the Mexican Revolution picked up steam, *La Calavera Garbancera* evolved into *La Calavera Catrina*,

catrina being the feminine form of the Spanish adjective *catrín*, meaning well-dressed or dandy. *La Catrina* characterizes the elite of Mexico as a skull wearing a French plumed hat; white-washing, or washing out their native roots for European ones. The white face painting is said to be their attempt at being white.⁶ Posada's message was, "Regardless of what you wear or how white you try to dress and be, your bones are native."⁷

The satirical character in the French plumed hat appears again in 1947 in the work of Mexican painter Diego Rivera in which he gave her a body and dressed her in fancy clothing. At the center of this mural, "*Sueño de una Tarde Dominical en Alameda Central*" ("*Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park*") *La Catrina* wears

a feather boa around her neck, made of sheaves of withered corn with a snake's head on the end of the right side. Fangs are projecting from the snake's mouth. The left side of the boa ends with a snake's rattle reminiscent of Mictecacihuatl, the Aztec goddess of death.

"Sueño de una Tarde Dominical en Alameda Central" ("Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park")

In 1947, ten years before his death, Mexican artist Diego Rivera, famous not only for his many paintings but also for his murals throughout his homeland and the United States, was commissioned to paint a mural in the dining hall of the Del Prado Hotel at the center of the Mexico City's elegant life. The hotel is situated across from Alameda Park. This partnership of painter and hotel was a natural one as they both desired to attract wealthy American tourists. It was these Americans who were purchasing Diego's work -- the young American girls who were seeking their brief moment of fame in his presence -- and the hotel was seeking the business of these wealthy patrons.

Diego's increasing preoccupation with the thought of his death rapidly approaching, and the location of the Del Prado Hotel across from the Alameda blend together to shape the theme of his mural "Sueño de una Tarde Dominical en Alameda Central," Figure 2. At this point in his life, Rivera took great pleasure in his skills as a storyteller. He employed his creative energy to the creation of his autobiography, reliving his life as a splendid myth. This dream-like composition is composed of figures drawn from children's history books, national legends, childhood thoughts, memories and fantasies, all of which could only coexist in a dream.⁸ Diego's daughter Guadalupe explained her father's imaginary tales saying, "My Father was a storyteller and he invented new episodes of his past every day."⁹ This fresco is also said to be Rivera's personal response to the question of one of his personal historical heroes, Ignacio Ramirez, who was an intellectual leader of the Reformation under Benito Juarez: "Whence do we come? Where are we going?"¹⁰



Figure 2 *Sueño de una Tarde Dominical en Alameda Central* by Diego Rivera

As a child, during the reign of Porfirio Díaz, Rivera would frequent La Alameda with his parents or aunts and uncles. Often times they would rent a seat for twenty-five or fifty centavos by the bandstand to enjoy the music of a military band. The park was visited by respectable ladies and gentlemen and their children attired in their Sunday best. Peddlers strolled the park with their wares: brightly colored balloons and pinwheels, sugar-sticky treats, and a rainbow variety of drinks. As Diego remembers, the police were ever present to keep out the beggars, pick pockets and the shabby Indians. As an adult, on holidays, Diego would sometimes stroll the park with his wife and daughters.

Alameda Park has a rich history of its own which Rivera incorporates into his work. At one end of Alameda, during colonial times, there had been a monastery, where according to tradition, the Inquisition burned its victims alive at the stake until it was mandated to end this activity due to the horrifying smell of burning flesh in the park and surrounding areas. Also in this square, President Santa Anna, in 1848, betrayed the country

and handed it over on a silver platter to the Yankee invaders.¹¹ On December 4, 1914 Emiliano Zapata and Francisco “Pancho” Villa occupied Mexico City and camped on the Alameda.

The central figure of Rivera’s densely populated mural, *La Calavera Catrina*, stands holding the left hand of a young Diego at about the age of ten. The boy knows that he can trust Catrina because she will accompany him throughout his life and beyond into death.¹² The child has a toad climbing out of one pocket while a snake emerges from another. To the left of *La Catrina* is the image of the engraver and great artistic mentor of Rivera, Jose Guadalupe Posada with whom the Grande Dame of Death holds her other hand. Behind the boy Diego stands his third wife Frida Kahlo, with a protective hand on his shoulder. In her other hand, Frida holds a small sphere on which are painted the symbols of yin and yang, the two complementary forces that make up all aspects and phenomena of life. To the child’s right, in plumed hats, are Rivera’s two daughters depicted as elegant adult ladies.

The width of “*The Dream...*” measures over four times its height and is crowded with over 150 figures, each one significant in Mexican history or in Rivera’s own life. The work is divided into three equal parts from left to right and three horizontal planes of depth. The narrative of Mexico’s history reads chronologically across the entire width of the mural from left to right beginning with a tiered assemblage of colonial and early 19th century events and characters, at the center a single level of late 19th century full-length figures, and finally another broad tier composition which depicts early 20th century activities and characters. The foreground row of full-length figures intervenes with the middle ground row of historical characters and events, which keep the present time in mind (the present time being Rivera’s youth as he placed himself near the center of the work). Along the full length of the foreground the average Mexicans of the Díaz era are abandoned and outcast in contrast to the class represented in the work immediately above them. Rivera’s daughter stated that this is a depiction of what he witnessed as a young boy in Mexico City and that it strongly influenced his life and his view of society in general.¹³ There are four background portraits that are larger than life: Benito Juarez, Porfirio Díaz, Emiliano Zapata, and Francisco Madero. They are of great importance, yet placed just above the middle ground progression of lesser historical figures. These are the personalities who contributed to the formation of a national consciousness and realized the moral value of social responsibility and are thought to have played a role in the development of Diego’s intellectual comprehension of the national issues of his time.¹⁴ All of the elements of this single dream are bound together by the arterial branches of the park’s trees skillfully assembled by the artist into well-composed groups blending colorful hues of red, blue, yellow, brown, gray, white, and black, which also adds to the dream-like quality. These elements are also held together by the fact that they are parts of an individual cluster of memories and fantasies in the mind of the creator. Despite the elements of a history so full of bloodshed, failure, tragedy and treachery, and the central presence of death, Rivera successfully creates a festive, humorous, light-hearted mood in this work.

The Alameda piece, of all of the murals that Diego created, is the only work in which he interlaced personal fantasies with autobiography. This mural seems as if it was almost his final act in which he presented his public with a landscape of everything that shaped his character. The irony of Diego Rivera’s life was his decision to return home to Mexico from his time painting in Italy to spread a message for the future of order and hope, and to reinterpret it in terms of the Indian culture. He ended up in the Hotel Del Prado painting “*Sueño de una Tarde Dominical en Alameda[,]*” **painted from the perspective of a ten year old Rivera**, representing the corrupt present and the idyllic past with no reference to the future.¹⁵

Evolution and Rebirth: Mictecacíhuatl into La Calavera Catrina

The poem that I will be using with my students is “Catrina” by Xánath Caraza. Xánath Caraza is from Vera Cruz, Mexico and currently resides in Kansas City, Missouri. She is a contemporary poet, author of short stories and an educator. Caraza’s poems have been translated into many languages and she has indicated that as a result she thinks about the effects of translation as she writes in Spanish, which alters the way she writes.¹⁶ Her works are full of tastes, smells and other sense experiences and because of this they have often been interpreted in the form of visual art.

“Catrina” is a work of actual ekphrasis. While the poem is written in response to an existing work of art, in this case a mural, you will notice that it seems to stray from the artwork. As I learned in seminar, this is not uncommon with works of actual ekphrasis and nonetheless still provides an in for the students to the poem. This work is written in free verse without a regular rhythm or meter and does not contain rhyme. The poem consists of twenty-two stanzas and is divided into two parts; the first section is comprised of seven stanzas related to the Aztec deity Mictecacíhuatl, and the remainder of the work is dedicated to La Calavera Catrina. Just as Rivera presented to us the narrative of Mexico’s history chronologically across his canvas, Caraza presents to us the evolution or transformation of the Aztec Goddess of Death into the Mexican Grande Dame of Death from top to bottom in her poem. Whereas the figure of La Calavera Catrina is strategically placed just to the left of center, in the second third, of Rivera’s mural, Caraza reveals the transformation of Mictecacíhuatl into Catrina in the eighth stanza of the poem, which is the beginning of its second third .

Xánath Caraza employs personification, symbolism, repetition, and colorful imagery in “Catrina” to illustrate the theme of rebirth.

Mictecacíhuatl, fue.

En elegante Catrina,

la del sombrero ancho

se transforma.”

“Mictecacíhuatl, it was.

As an elegant Catrina,

the one in the wide-brimmed hat

transforms herself.

The poet begins her ekphrastic work on Rivera’s “Sueño de una Tarde Dominical en la Alameda” by immediately making the connection between Mictecacíhuatl, the Aztec Goddess of Death, the keeper of the bones, and La Calavera Catrina, the central figure of the Alameda mural for whom the poem is named. Then Caraza reveals to us the theme of rebirth through her effective employment of personification. For example, she makes reference to the “Tree of life” (“Árbol de vida”) telling it to extend its branches/ brazos (arms in Spanish) and allow the rebirth of the spirits. She also describes the tips of the tree branches throbbing with divine fire as if they were alive, like blood coursing through one’s arteries and veins. Remember that Diego bound together all of the elements of his single dream with the arterial branches of the park’s trees into well-composed groups blending colorful hues of red, orange, yellow, brown, gray, white, and black, which seem to

give the trees a human quality as various branches appear to be reaching, bending, extending, as if they were alive.

Caraza gracefully weaves the use of symbols that represent rebirth throughout the work. Early in the poem she speaks of roaring water that is born from the caverns (“Río Viejo, fragor de agua brava de las cavernas naces . . .”). In literature, water is linked to the idea of birth, and caves are womb-like. As the caverns give birth to the water, “Butterflies listen.” (“Las mariposas escuchen.”) The poet makes several references throughout the poem to butterflies, most especially to orange ones. These orange butterflies, at times swarms of them, cover one’s heart (“[cubran su corazón.”), enter on one’s bones (“ Entra el aleteo de la maiposa anarajando en los huesos.”) and become one with “her.” (“se enreda en su pelo se hace una con él.”)

Her use of these insects is rife with symbolism, as it was the belief of the ancient Aztecs that Monarch butterflies were the souls of their deceased ancestors reborn, and permitted by the Lady of Mitclán to visit their loved ones on Earth one day a year. The Aztec people saw the image of a human face in outline on the Monarch’s wings. Even today, in certain parts of Mexico, these butterflies are believed to be the envoys of the gods and the people honor them by burning an incense of wax and copal.

As to the use of repetition, the poet repeats the entire first stanza of the poem about one third of the way into the piece. It is evident through this repetition that she is setting us up for an event; something is about to change. Yet again, Caraza deftly employs the use of symbolism with the rustling of the papel picado that announces Catrina. This rustling is symbol for change; emerging is Catrina with her entourage of orange butterflies. Mictecacíhuatl is no longer; Catrina is now the Grande Dame of Death. The Lady of Mitclán has evolved; she has been given new life. She is reborn, dressed in finery, with a playful personality, and always portrayed with a huge grin. She is a revolutionary woman born of the Mexican Revolution.

The devices of imagery present in this work mostly appeal to the reader’s visual and olfactory senses. For example, the aroma of copal, the sacred incense offered to the gods, and sugar skulls awaken our sense of smell. Copal is similar to the incense used today in some religious ceremonies. The scent of sugar skulls reminds the reader of festive celebrations. “Steaming hot chocolate” (“humeante chocolate”), “amber light bathing our walk” (“ambaarina luz bañan nuestro andar”), “flowers” (“flores”), “papel picado,” “and smiles” (“y sonrisas”), all this colorful imagery invades our senses and evokes memories of joy and happiness. This is the message of La Calavera Catrina, reborn from her Aztec ancestor Mictecacíhuatl: life is full of joy, passion, trials, and tribulations and it still goes on. The only constant in life is death.

As Catrina continues to dance and dance without ceasing in Caraza’s work, she reminds us to enjoy the sweetness of life. As the Mexican Revolution changed the political and social circumstances in the lives of so many Mexican people, so has Catrina changed the people’s attitudes towards toward death from the rigid sobriety of the Aztecs to one of humor, laughing at the inevitable.

Teaching Strategies

Vocabulary

Just reading an ELA standard with the words “Distinguish shades of meaning” is like a neon sign flashing “natural connection to visual art!” I plan to use shades of color to connect the shades of meaning/emotions of

ekphrastic poetry by using paint chips to illustrate the semantic gradients of their descriptors.

Semiotics is a study of how meaning is created and how that meaning is communicated. We are able to communicate using color, as each one has its own meaning which can vary from one culture to another. Colors can be used to signify value, order, or emotions. For the purpose of this curriculum unit, I am incorporating the semiotics of color to teach vocabulary in such a way as to not cause confusion and to ensure that my students and I all understand and are following the same system. For the purpose of this teaching strategy, I selected the following universal color meanings from the “Colours in Cultures” color wheel on the *Information is Beautiful* website; red will be used to express anger or passion, yellow to express happiness, blue to express melancholy or sadness, green to express envy or jealousy, orange to express geniality, pink to express health/life, black to express evil, and white to express goodness/purity.

Using semantic gradients, students examine the subtle differences between related words by arranging them in a continuum. The goals of using this strategy are to help students develop their vocabulary, extend their knowledge of words, and encourage them to think about the relationships among similar words. Understanding these relationships will help students become effective communicators in the target language. The teacher will select a descriptor in the target language related to the ekphrastic work being studied, students will write it on the top shade of the paint strip with shades of the color universally associated with it. On the next shade of the strip, students will write a synonym in the target language for that word, likely another commonly used descriptor. Then students will use the remaining shades of color to create a list of semantically similar words arranging them in an order that illustrates an understanding of each word’s meaning. I will encourage students to arrange the words in order of intensity, from least to most to reflect the intensity of the color shades. Upon completion, students will discuss the rationale for placing their chosen descriptors in the specific order. I will encourage conversations about the subtle differences among the words.

Close Reading

The Delaware Department of Education - World Languages current focus is connecting proficiency and the Common Core State Standards for ELA with a focus on Reading and Writing. Close reading is a technique used to teach students to carefully study a piece of writing by reading it several times, each time looking for a different bit of information. The process can begin with a pre-reading question, or a “hook” with the teacher asking the class a question or providing some background information. Then the teacher will have the students identify the text feature of the reading. The first reading is done aloud by the teacher as students follow along circling any words they do not know and annotating any sentence(s) or paragraph(s) they do not understand with a question mark. After the first reading, using a graphic organizer for learning and reflection, students will write a Learning/About statement, a statement telling about what they just read, a brief summary. The students complete the second reading independently. As the students read, they underline details in the text that support their Learning/About statements. Next, the students, using the same graphic organizer from the first read, write a reflection. The reflection can be questions they still have about the text, predictions, or a personal connection that they have to that particular part of the story. With a shoulder partner, each student discusses the details they selected from the text and how they support their Learning/About statement. Reflections are also shared. The teacher then conducts a whole class discussion regarding the details of the text in order to check for understanding. In addition, the teacher addresses student questions about the reading. This discussion is followed up with a series of text dependent questions. Students work through these questions in pairs. The teacher continues the close reading process with a whole class discussion of the questions and the text in order to check for accuracy.¹⁷

CAFE - Check for Understanding

CAFE consists of learning strategies to check for students' Comprehension (I understand what I read), Accuracy (I can read the words), Fluency (I can read accurately, with expression, and understand what I read), and Expanded Vocabulary (I know, find, and use interesting words). The teaching strategies are used to assess the students' understanding of a concept, determine if the students can transfer the lesson objectives to a new situation, emphasize the key points of the lesson, or extend the lesson's content. The strategy used is usually brief and is typically used as a formative assessment, helping the instructor to determine a course of action for the learning activities that will be implemented in the near future.¹⁸

Classroom Activities

Activity 1: Introduction

The first activity was designed as a hook to get the students to engage with the themes that will be covered throughout the unit. This activity consists of three parts: Access Prior Knowledge, Review of the Celebration of Día de los Muertos, and Study of Ekphrastic Poetry.

Step 1: Access Prior Knowledge - Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead)

To assess what the students already know I will present the students with questions in the target language like "What do you know about the celebration of the Day of the Dead?" "How do you feel about the Day of the Dead?" "Is it possible to communicate with spirits?" Students will record their responses on paper. I anticipate that some students will mention sugar skulls, Calaveras poems, the novel "Tumba," and the movie "Coco." Some students will admit to being frightened or nervous about the Day of the Dead. Very few students will think it is possible to communicate with spirits.

Students then share their responses with a shoulder partner. Then I will direct a whole class discussion related to the questions. I suggest conducting a class poll related to the questions having the students create a bar graph or a pie chart of the results. This will give students visual data indicating the similar opinions and experiences of classmates.

Step 2: Review Día de los Muertos

The next part of this lesson will extend and refine student understanding of Día de los Muertos through the use of a video. Video works well in my curriculum as a large percentage of my students acquire information visually, from charts, illustrations, photographs and videos. Before delving into the ekphrastic poem "Catrina" by Xánath Caraza, written in response to Diego Rivera's mural "Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park," I suggest using photographs or a video to review the celebration of Día de los Muertos to provide the students some context. There is a colorful and informative animated short video on *You Tube* titled "Día de los Muertos" that illustrates a young Mexican girl's experience with the holiday.¹⁹ Using visuals, such as videos and pictures, is especially helpful for students with special needs as they help these students to acquire background knowledge and put the elements of the lesson into context. After watching the video, or as students look at photographs, I will ask questions in the target language such as "What activities are characteristic of the celebration?" "What decorations did you observe?" "Is the celebration[] happy or sad?"

What evidence from the video led you to this conclusion?” and “Did you like the video?”²⁰

Activity 2: Study of Ekphrastic Poetry

For the purpose of this unit, I suggest dividing the study of ekphrastic poetry into two sections: Part 1 – Art; the study of the mural “ Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park” by Mexican artist Diego Rivera; and Part 2 – Poetry; the study of the ekphrastic poem “Catrina” by Mexican – born poet Xánath Caraza. These sections, in progression, provide the students with some art history, some background about the artist, and information about the mural. As a culmination, the students will learn about ekphrastic poetry, be introduced to the poet Xánath Caraza and her ekphrastic poem, and analyze the poem in relation to Rivera’s mural. It is my hope that my students will “journey” through the history of Mexico via the study of “Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park” and develop a greater appreciation of Mexican culture through the interpretation and analysis of Xánath Caraza’s ekphrastic poem “Catrina.”

Part 1: Art

Vocabulary - Access Prior Knowledge

To get the lesson started I will provide each student with a knowledge rating scale chart, prior to any instruction about the terms. The chart will have a list of twenty or so vocabulary words in the target language related to the work of art. My students will rate themselves on their level of familiarity with each term by placing a check in a column under one of the following headings; “Have No Clue,” “Have Seen or Heard,” and “I Know It Well.” I will instruct the students to provide the English meaning of the word in another column labeled “Definition” if they know a word on the list well enough to provide their own definition. If a student has seen or heard a vocabulary term from the list I will direct them to write an educated guess as to the meaning of the word in the column labeled “I Think It Means.” It is important to encourage them to be honest, as their responses will determine how much time will be devoted to the instruction of each vocabulary term.

Vocabulary - Direct Instruction

After the students reflect on their knowledge of the target language vocabulary, I will use a vocabulary chart made up of two columns, one with the vocabulary terms and the other with their English meanings, to clearly teach the vocabulary. Using this chart makes certain that all students have the needed vocabulary to participate in class discussions and activities. Students use the definitions to complete a graphic organizer based on the vocabulary terms in the target language by writing a definition or meaning of the word in English, writing a sentence in the target language using the term in context, and sketching the vocabulary word. Initially I will instruct the students to complete each section of the graphic organizer for every term with the end goal in mind of each student determining which option--definition, sentence, or sketch--is the most effective tool for him/her to learn and remember the vocabulary.

Close Reading

As the students prepare to view the mural I will explain to them that they will be using a strategy called Close Reading, working both independently and collaboratively to closely analyze the work of art. I will further explain that they will view the mural a couple of times, each time focusing on a different aspect of it. I suggest that the mural to be studied be divided into three separate viewings. In the first viewing of Rivera’s mural I will project the work. I will ask the students to look at the picture in silence for a minute or two and think about what they see. What is happening in the picture? After a minute or two I will ask the entire class, in the target

language, "What do you see in the picture?" I anticipate the students to respond with the obvious — "There are a lot of people in a park. Some of the people are really dressed up. The mural looks old. There is a skeleton dressed up like a lady." When a student provides an answer, I will ask her/him to supply more information. "You said it looks like the people are in a park. What makes you say that?" The students will justify their answers by providing evidence from the painting. They may say, "There are a lot of trees, a fountain, and what looks like a merry-go-round." Next I will encourage the students to share differing opinions and provide justification for their opinions, as this will deepen the conversation and allow for a wider variety in the student interpretations of the various elements of the piece. One student may say, "The man in the hot air balloon is from the Wizard of Oz because it looks similar to the scene in the movie." I would then ask if everyone agrees with the statement. Another student might say that s/he doesn't agree because the balloon has the initials "RM" on it, and the Wizard of Oz takes place in Oz, not in Mexico. The discussion continues until students have shared all they can about the painting. I will summarize what the students said. After the discussion, the students will use a graphic organizer, a one-page paper divided in half with the first half labeled *Learning* and the other half labeled *Reflection*, to write a Learning/About statement and a brief summary.

The second viewing is viewing with purpose. I will provide each student with a copy of the mural. Students study the work independently, highlighting details in the mural that support their learning statements. Using the above graphic organizer, students reflect upon what they just viewed. I will explain to the students that the reflection column can include questions they still have about the work, observations, or a personal connection that they have to a particular part of the mural. With a shoulder partner, each student will discuss the details they selected from the mural and how they support their Learning/About statement. Reflections are also shared. I will then conduct a whole class discussion regarding the details of the mural in order to check for understanding. In addition, I will address student questions about the mural.

The next step in the close process is a series of text-dependent questions. I will model for the students the process of answering these questions by working through the first question with them. The process requires the students to begin by review the mural. Next, they will review the completed graphic organizer. Then they will seek the answer to the question and discuss the question with a partner, checking for accuracy and clarification. The final step is where the students write their best possible answer using all of the information that they have gathered to adequately answer the question.

To end the close reading process I will lead a whole class discussion of the questions and the work in order to check for accuracy and address any inaccurate responses.

Check for Understanding

This check for understanding for the art portion of the unit can be used to assess students' comprehension of the work of art. I will provide each student with a copy of the mural which they will glue or tape onto a looseleaf sheet of paper. I will direct the students to write six sentences in the target language about the mural. The sentences can be statements or questions. Students will share their sentences with the class. This allows the students to have a visual with their own notes to remind them of what they are learning and thinking, and it provides for me a quick check to assess their comprehension of the work.

Part 2: Ekphrastic Poetry

Vocabulary

The vocabulary introduced at this point will be related to poetry terms and vocabulary specific to the poem of study, "Catrina." In order to provide consistency throughout unit, I will use the same procedures for accessing prior knowledge and direct instruction of vocabulary as in the previous lesson with the exception of the completion of a graphic organizer for vocabulary definitions. Instead of using the graphic organizer I will have students create digital flashcards using the website Quizlet or a similar site. On sites such as Quizlet students can create their personalized study stack of vocabulary terms, allowing them to be active participants in the learning process. Digital media works well in my curriculum because of its multisensory appeal and will engage my visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners.

Close Reading

In order to maintain consistency I will employ the same close reading processes used in the previous lesson when reading Caraza's poem. Within this theme I suggest dividing the text into three different readings. To get started, I will explain to the students that they will be reading the text a couple of times, each time focusing on a different aspect of it. I suggest that the poem to be read be divided into three separate readings. In my opinion, the most logical division is by thirds; the first section will include the first seven stanzas, the second section [] the next seven stanzas, and the last section [] the final eight stanzas. This division of the poem allows the students to identify the build up to the transformation of Mictecacíhuatl into La Catrina, the exact moment in the poem that transformation takes place, and then Catrina's evolution into the Mexican icon of death that she is today. The first read of the first section is read aloud by the teacher. Students follow along circling any words they do not know and annotating any text they do not understand with a question mark. After this first read students use a graphic organizer, a one-page paper divided in half with the first half labeled *Learning* and the other half labeled *Reflection*, to write a Learning/About statement and a brief summary.

The second reading is reading with purpose. Students read independently underlining details in the poem that support their learning statements. Using the above graphic organizer, students reflect upon what they just read. I will explain that the reflection can be questions they still have related to the poem. With a shoulder partner, each student will discuss the details they selected from the text and how they support their Learning/About statement. Reflections are also shared. I will then conduct a whole class discussion regarding the details of the text in order to check for understanding. In addition, I will address student questions about the poem.

The next step in the close reading process is a series of text-dependent questions. I will model for the students the process of answering these questions by working through the first question with them. The students will be reminded of the close reading process. The students will begin by reading the section of the poem again. Next, they will take notes to help better understand the section of the text. They will discuss the question with a partner. To finish they will write their best possible answer to the question, using all of the information that they have gathered.

To end the close reading process I will lead a whole class discussion of the questions and the text in order to check for accuracy. As with the first third of the poem, the close reading process will be practiced when reading the remaining thirds with the text dependent questions being section specific.

Check for Understanding

To assess the students' understanding of the ekphrastic nature of the poem "Catrina" I will have students annotate a copy of Rivera's mural identifying figures, items, symbols in it that are alluded to in Caraza's poem. I anticipate that students will identify La Calavera Catrina off to the left of center in the mural. Some students might point out the angel in the right third of the work while others may spot the rising smoke in the background. I will encourage students to review and reflect upon their learning statements and reflections from the close readings to help them with their annotations. I will then ask students to justify their annotations with evidence from the poem. I will assess their understanding of the ekphrastic nature of the poem by looking at the evidence from the poem that they provided to justify their annotations.

Activity 3: Creating an Original Ekphrastic Poem

To conclude the unit, each student will author an original ekphrastic poem in the target language in response to Rivera's mural. This culminating activity will require each student to complete research about figures or items in the mural that interest him/her. I will provide students with a packet containing the following information about this project; a letter addressed to both the student and their parent(s), a detailed explanation of the project requirements along with helpful vocabulary and phrases in the target language, explanations and examples of poetic forms available for the students to use, and the rubric that will be used to assess their work. Students will share their original ekphrastic work with their classmates digitally, using a learning management system like Schoology, and with the larger school community in a poetry slam.

Vocabulary

In this activity students will use semantic gradients to examine the subtle differences between related words by arranging them in a continuum. The goals of using this strategy are to help students develop their vocabulary, extend their knowledge of words, and encourage them to think about the relationships among similar words. This will provide them with a more robust descriptive vocabulary when writing ekphrastic poetry. From the vocabulary list in Activity 2, I will select [] twelve or so vocabulary terms and descriptors in the target language. Next, working as shoulder partners, each pair of students will be randomly assigned one of the twelve vocabulary terms. Using the infographic "Colour in Cultures" from the website *Information is Beautiful*, students will select the color that most universally relates to the descriptor; for example, yellow for happiness, or blue for sadness. Then after selecting a paint chip strip with four shades of the chosen color, each student pair will write and illustrate their descriptor on the first shade of the paint chip strip. Students may illustrate using emojis, stick figures, or whatever type of drawing helps them to best visualize the descriptor. For the vocabulary term *contento*, which in English means contented, the students might draw a smiley face emoji. Then students will use the remaining shades of color to create a list of semantically similar words arranging them in an order that illustrates an understanding of each word's meaning. As they arrange the words, students can discuss and justify their ordering. I will encourage students to arrange the words in order of intensity from the original descriptor given, from least to most, to reflect the intensity of the color shades. Upon completion, students will discuss the rationale for placing their chosen descriptors in the specific order. I will encourage conversations about the subtle differences among the words. To differentiate this activity, students can be given the paint chip strip with the first descriptor determined, and the remaining descriptors on sticky notes. Students then have to place the descriptors in order on the strip.

In Figure 3, I have provided two examples of this activity using the descriptors *contento* (contented) and *decepcionado* (disappointed). Because universally the color yellow is associated with happiness and the color

blue is associated with sadness, I chose the paint chip strips with the shades of those colors.²¹ The vocabulary in the target language, Spanish, is written on the paint chips in order of word intensity to match the intensity of the color shades. On the yellow strip, the first paint chip displays the word Spanish *contento*, which means contented in English. The next word in the semantic gradient is *feliz*, meaning happy. The third word is *alegre*, which means joyous. The final word choice is *jubiloso*, which means jubilant. On the blue strip, the first Spanish term is *decepcionado*, meaning disappointed. The second word choice is *triste*, sad. Third, I have selected *abatido*, which means glum. Last is the Spanish word *deprimido*, meaning depressed. As mentioned previously, students should be encouraged to discuss and justify their ordering during the process of creating their own semantic gradients and they should be prompted to provide their rationale for placing the descriptors in the specific order, noting the subtle differences between the words. These semantic gradient charts will be displayed on a word wall in the classroom for the students to refer to when making word choices in the creation of their ekphrastic work.

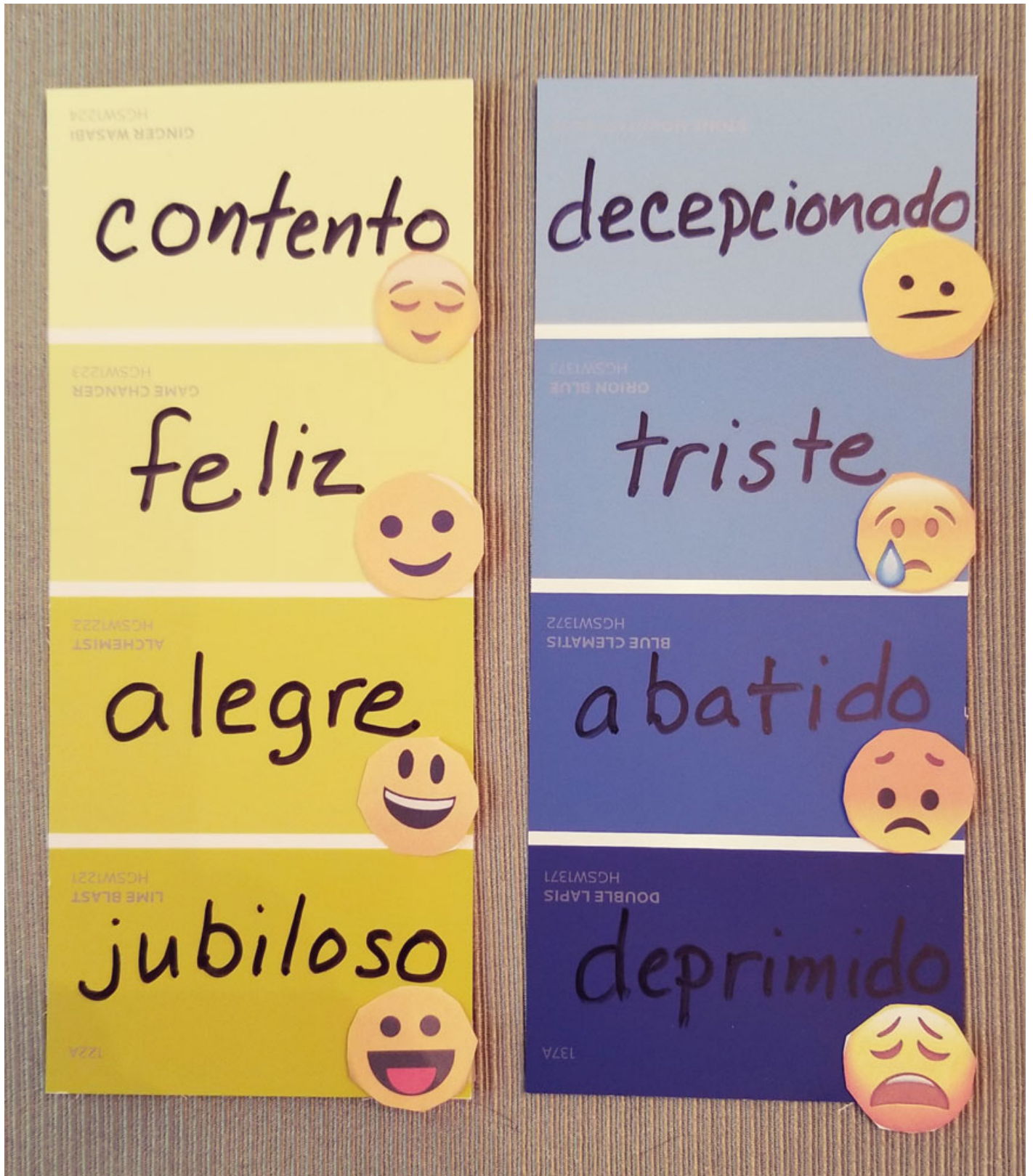


Figure 3 Examples of paint chip strip semantic gradients created by the author

Poetry Slam

As part of the culminating project of this unit, the students will participate in a poetry slam. A poetry slam is a

competition in which the poets perform their original poetic works and are judged by members of the audience. Every student poet will participate in the first round. The judges' scores will determine participating poets in the subsequent rounds. Poets will have two minutes to read their poem. If a poet goes over the allotted time, points will be deducted from the total score. The poet may not use musical instruments, props, or costumes. There will be five judges for each round. Of the scores received from the judges, the high and low score will be dropped and the remaining three scores are added together. The purpose of this activity is for students to showcase to the school community what they have learned from their study of ekphrastic poetry and creatively express their newfound knowledge of the Mexican culture. The poetry slam provides a playful environment in which student poets can verbally communicate their original poetic work in the target language to a larger audience. My hope is that because the students will be communicating to a live audience, they will put forth the effort to be understood, employing correct pronunciation, intonation, gestures, volume, and body language all of which will be practiced and coached in class in preparation for the poetry slam.

Appendix A: Standards

This unit will be based on two IB MYP Objectives, two Delaware World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages and one Common Core State Standard. I will focus on IB Language Acquisition Objective Criterion C: Comprehending Written Text requiring the student to understand information and engage with the text by supporting opinion and personal response with evidence from the text. I will also evaluate Criterion D: Communicating in Written Form, which expects the student to organize and express thoughts, feelings, ideas, opinions and information in writing, write for specific purposes, and develop accuracy when writing in the target language. The Delaware World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages are Standard 1.3 Presentational Communication: Learners present information, concepts, and ideas to inform, explain, persuade, and narrate on a variety of topics using appropriate media and adapting to various audiences of listeners, readers or viewers; and Standard 2.1 Relating Cultural Practices to Perspectives: Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied. I will focus on the Common Core Standard CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.7 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

Teacher Resources

Allens, Ms. "Close Reading in Foreign Language (French)." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZkjBP4eink&t=1s>.

This video demonstrates the effective practices of close reading in the world language classroom.

Caraza, Xánath. "'Catrina' Por Xánath Caraza - Lvmdayofdead." Smithsonian Latino Center Día De Los Muertos. <http://lvmdayofdead.tumblr.com/post/152269003202/catrina-por-xánath-caraza>.

This site contains a video of the author reading her poem aloud. It also includes written versions of the poem in both Spanish and English.

Downs, Linda, Laurance P. Hurlburt, and Jorge Hernández Campos. *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective*. Detroit: Founders Society Detroit Institute of Arts in Association with W.W. Norton

This source provides a detailed explanation of Rivera's mural along with a labeled diagram of the figures in it.

TheCGBro. "Día De Los Muertos." YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jCQnUuq-TEE>.

This short video is about a little girl who visits the land of dead and there learns the true meaning of the Mexican holiday, Day of the Dead. It can be used to introduce the Mexican holiday, or to review the holiday if your students are already familiar with it.

McCandless, David. "Colours in Cultures." Information Is Beautiful. <https://informationisbeautiful.net/visualizations/colours-in-cultures/>.

This visual provides information about what colors signify in different cultures.

"The Water Poet." Asymptote. <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/special-feature/victoria-livingstone-on-xanath-caraza/>.

This article contains an interview with poet Xánath Caraza and provides biographical information.

"Vocabulary/Knowledge Rating Comprehension and Learning Strategy." PDF. National Behavior Support Service.

This document provides various graphic organizers for teaching vocabulary as well as a detailed explanation of Marzano's Six Steps to Effective Vocabulary Instruction.

Wolfe, Bertram David. *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*.

This book provides detailed information on the life of Diego Rivera.

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