

## The implementation of museum audio description in foreign language education: A pilot study

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, audio description (AD) has been introduced in foreign language education (FLE) to develop language and intercultural skills. This article reports on a pilot study that focused on museum AD – that is, the verbal description of artworks for a visually impaired audience – and aimed to explore its pedagogical value in FLE. An English-language lesson on museum AD was designed and taught to two undergraduate classes (B2–C1 level). Students completed reception and production activities aimed at accomplishing a real-life media accessibility task, that is, describing an artwork to a visually impaired person. Data was collected through class recordings and observations, interviews with the instructors, and students' surveys and writing tasks. The findings show participants' appreciation of and engagement in the lesson, and highlight the value of museum AD for the development of empathy to enhance sense of citizenship, critical thinking, analytical and observational skills and, in turn, language skills. Furthermore, translating images into words seems to contribute to strengthening cultural awareness and creative thinking. By drawing on the affordances of museum AD, suggestions for classroom applications and research directions are also provided.

### **Keywords**

Museum audio description, foreign language education, English as a Foreign Language, audiovisual translation

## 1. Introduction

The value of adopting audiovisual materials in foreign language education (FLE) is now supported by a substantial body of literature (Lertola, 2019; Talaván, 2020). Yet, the most common audiovisual translation (AVT) practices for experimentation and classroom integration are often limited to subtitling and dubbing, and only recently followed by media accessibility practices such as audio description (AD). Although initially conceived for blind and partially sighted audiences, AD has been investigated from different perspectives, which have acknowledged its benefits for sighted individuals, including language learners (Talaván *et al.*, 2022). In line with this, AD has started to be explored as a didactic resource to develop lexical and phraseological competence and writing skills (Ibáñez Moreno & Vermeulen, 2013), as well as oral skills (Navarrete, 2018; Talaván & Lertola, 2016).

The present contribution focuses on museum AD and its potential for implementation in FLE, which remains an under-researched area of inquiry. By offering an intersemiotic translation of artworks and artefacts for a visually impaired audience, museum AD inherently serves a social function, which may broaden learners' understanding of diversity issues, empower them to cultivate their sense of citizenship and enhance their social agency. In addition, museum AD may arguably contribute to developing language skills (e.g., the acquisition of specialised vocabulary) and visual literacy skills (Ruanglertbutr, 2016, p. 18), as well as fostering cultural appreciation and critical and creative thinking through multimodal inputs. Against this backdrop, this pilot study aims to explore the pedagogical value of museum AD in the language classroom as a practice to enhance communicative language competences and, more broadly, to raise awareness of the relevance of cultural heritage and media accessibility practices within a democratic society.

Building on a contribution where museum AD is proposed as a pedagogical practice in the foreign language (FL) classroom (Bartolini, 2022), the present study illustrates a lesson designed with a focus on accomplishing a real-life task: describing an artwork to a visually impaired person. This lesson was taught to two different classes by two different language instructors. Both classes were part of an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course for students enrolled in an undergraduate programme in Modern Languages and Cultures at the University of Bologna, Italy. The course's target level corresponded to C1 of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2011, 2018).

Museum AD was employed as the primary authentic material to engage students in reception and production activities. Data was collected through class recordings and observations, interviews with the two instructors, and students' surveys and writing tasks. The analysis focused on the participants' perceptions of the value of museum AD for the development of language competences and transferable skills (e.g., cultural awareness, citizenship and social skills).

This paper discusses previous studies on didactic AD in FLE as well as museum AD. It continues by illustrating the study methodology and the data collection and analysis, and by discussing the results. Finally, suggestions for language practitioners are provided, along with the study's limitations and conclusions.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. AD as a pedagogical practice in foreign language education

AD involves "using speech to make audiovisual material accessible to people who might not perceive the visual element themselves" (Fryer, 2016, p. 9), either totally or partially. It is thus initially conceived for blind or visually impaired audiences to access visual information through a verbal rendering.

However, the broader benefits of AD for a range of sighted individuals – including students and educators – have emerged in empirical studies in which AD’s potential uses include guiding the learners’ attention in analysing audiovisual elements and complementing traditional teaching tools (Krejtz *et al.*, 2012). In the last few decades, the integration of AD into FLE environments has gained momentum (Lertola, 2019), also thanks to the ever-growing use of audiovisual media in the FL classroom (Herrero & Vanderschelden, 2019). However, as posited by Bolaños-García-Escribano and Navarrete (2022), the intersection between AD and teaching still seems to be marginal.

Earlier studies explored AD’s potential to offer additional linguistic material to the dialogues of an audiovisual product for reception activities aiming at vocabulary acquisition (Martínez Martínez, 2012) or improved lexical and phraseological competence (Ibáñez Moreno & Vermeulen, 2013), also encouraging cooperation between sighted and partially sighted learners (Walczak, 2016). Later studies focused on the design of task-based production and mediation activities, whereby students created their own AD scripts and even revoiced audiovisual products. Experimental studies have primarily been conducted on the enhancement of writing and speaking skills by asking students to perform/record the AD of a variety of videos in their FL, including movie scenes (Bausells-Espín, 2022; Cenni & Izzo, 2016; Ibáñez Moreno & Vermeulen, 2014; Rodrigues Barbosa, 2013), tourist advertisements (Talaván & Lertola, 2016) and other types of video clips (Calduch & Talaván, 2018; Navarrete, 2018). New methodological proposals have also been put forward by combining different AVT modes for students’ integrated skills enhancement (Talaván & Lertola, 2022).

Besides the improvement of language skills and intercultural awareness, the existing literature has addressed the extended social value of AD, which is based on the opportunity for students to create a socially useful product by making audiovisual content accessible for visually impaired people (Talaván, 2020). As such, the social dimension of AD “makes it a very motivating activity for language learners” (Lertola, 2019, p. 54), which confirms the importance of incorporating issues of diversity and inclusion in the FL classroom through activities allowing students to develop their role as mediators (Pintado Gutiérrez & Torralba, 2022). Not only may AD foster mediation in FL teaching, but it can also be a useful task to combine “linguistic and social skills based on real-life situations” (Pintado Gutiérrez & Torralba, 2022, p. 4). Other scholars such as Herrero and Escobar (2018) have supported the integration of AD as a multiliteracy-oriented task in the FLE curriculum in order to develop creativity and critical thinking while improving film literacy and accessibility awareness.

In addition, recent research has stressed the importance of reassessing the role of students’ perceptions as valuable evidence of task difficulty and usefulness, and of their own learning progress (Bausells-Espín, 2022). Such insights have set the basis for further research into the pedagogical potential of this practice.

## **2.2. Introduction to museum audio description**

Although AD normally refers to the description of visual information embedded in an audiovisual product, AD also caters for the needs of blind and visually impaired audiences in accessing art and live performances. Museum AD is a specific AD sub-genre offering “a verbal description that seeks to make the visual elements of the diverse contents of museums and galleries accessible to blind and partially sighted people” (Hutchinson & Eardley, 2019, p. 42). Yet, such a description may arguably be enjoyed also by “the rest of us, who can see but may not observe” (Snyder, 2008, p. 192), which hints at the wider potential of this inclusive practice for people with sight.

Crucial differences may be noticed between museum AD and the AD of films (henceforth, screen AD). As highlighted by Neves (2015), screen AD is framed by a self-contained audiovisual product and is determined by a narrative, so the amount of visual information to be provided verbally is necessarily limited and needs to fit in the so-called *spaces* between the film dialogues. Museum AD, however, is used in contexts that have no pre-defined boundaries, so “there is less concern with ‘when’ to say, and a great emphasis on ‘how’ and ‘what’ to say about ‘what’” (Neves, 2015, p. 69). Furthermore, the audience of a museum AD may be sitting or standing, which can affect individual comfort and attention span. This inevitably affects AD length and depth.

Given the burgeoning literature on the successful integration of screen AD in the language classroom, museum AD may arguably be a further innovative pedagogical instrument for FL teaching. Besides allowing students to develop integrated language skills while becoming aware of media accessibility issues, museum AD can also promote the acquisition of art-specific vocabulary and increase students’ awareness of the societal value of cultural heritage. The impact of using museum AD in the classroom could thus transcend language education. Drawing on previous research on the inclusive value of AD in education (Fiorucci, 2017), the present study seeks to investigate the integration of museum AD in daily teaching routines for promoting learning in the FL classroom.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Setting and participants

The setting of this study is an EFL course offered during the third year of an undergraduate programme in Foreign Languages, Literatures and Cultures at the University of Bologna, Italy. The aim of the course is to enable learners to reach the equivalent to a C1 level of the CEFR in all language skills, and its focus is on practical applications (e.g., reading and listening to authentic material, writing texts, discussing and debating orally). This EFL course runs over the whole academic year (October to May) and consists of two consecutive 90-minute classes per week. Students enrolled in this course are divided into four groups according to the grades scored in the second-year EFL course exam. For the purposes of this study, the two most advanced groups were selected (henceforth, Group 1 and Group 2).

The study participants (N=42) included 28 students enrolled in Group 1; 12 students enrolled in Group 2, including one visually impaired student; and two EFL instructors (one for each group). Students’ demographic data was collected through an optional after-class survey, which was completed by 23 participants. Overall, respondents shared similar profiles – 22 students (i.e., 96% of the respondents) ranged in age between 20 and 25, spoke Italian as their primary language, and had been studying English for over 10 years. English proficiency levels were fairly homogenous, as 12 students (52%) self-rated their level between B2 and C1 and 11 (48%) rated their level as C1 or greater.

#### 3.2. Study design, materials and procedure

A lesson focusing on museum AD was designed and taught in two EFL classes. Drawing on the pedagogical principles of the action-oriented approach (Council of Europe, 2001, 2018; Piccardo & North, 2019) and task-based language teaching (Skehan, 2003), the lesson revolved around a real-life task. The instructions students received were as follows:

You are doing an internship at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, and you have been asked by your supervisor to create an AD of a painting for visually impaired visitors. Your supervisor asked you to write a draft of your description and test it by reading it out loud to a group of colleagues.

During the lesson, students engaged in scaffolding activities in preparation for the final task. The lesson was divided into two consecutive 90-minute parts. Part 1 focused on reception activities (listening to a museum AD) to enhance oral comprehension skills (see Table 1), and language-focused activities to facilitate the acquisition of specific vocabulary about art, physical features, clothing, and expressive language.

Stage	Objective	Activity Description
<b>Warm-up</b>	Introduce topic and generate engagement	Students discuss their favourite museums and paintings in pairs and with the whole class.
<b>Introduction to museum AD</b>	Provide topic background and elicit students' knowledge about topic	Students answer questions on their understanding and expectations about museum AD. The instructor defines museum AD and explains its main features.
<b>Listening activity 1</b>	Listen for gist	Students listen to an authentic museum AD, answer gist questions, and try to form a mental image of the artwork being described.
<b>Reflection &amp; discussion</b>	Raise awareness about visual disabilities and museum AD as an accessibility practice	Students reflect on their experience listening to an authentic museum AD.
<b>Listening activity 2</b>	Listen for specific information	While re-listening to the museum AD, students read a list of statements about details of the artwork described; they select the right statements and correct the wrong ones.
<b>Picture-matching + Reflection &amp; discussion</b>	Raise awareness about visual disabilities and museum AD as an accessibility practice	Presented with a number of paintings, students select the artwork described in the museum AD. Students reflect on their reactions to museum AD and provide feedback.
<b>Vocabulary activity</b>	Acquire specific vocabulary	Students read the museum AD transcript. They identify and learn new vocabulary about art, physical features, clothing, and expressive language.

**Table 1.** Part 1 with focus on reception (source: authors)

Part 2 focused on the production task, that is, writing a museum AD and performing it out loud (see Table 2). The learning objectives of this task included fostering the ability to analyse and describe visual content and to focus on the audience's needs, promoting creative thinking, and enhancing descriptive and expressive writing.

Stage	Objective	Activity Description
<b>Task preparation</b>	Prepare for the task	The instructor provides guidelines for museum AD production and assigns one artwork to each group of students.
<b>Writing task: Draft museum ADs (group work)</b>	Observe and interpret images to describe them to visually impaired people. Use lexical and grammatical structures related to artwork descriptions	Groups write a 300-word AD script of their artworks.

<b>Speaking task: Present museum ADs</b>	Verify the effectiveness of museum ADs and receive audience feedback	One representative from each group reads the museum AD out loud. Listeners identify the artworks being described from a selection of pictures.
<b>Post-task reflection</b>	Reflect on the task outcomes	Students reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their museum AD script and the delivery.
<b>Final discussion</b>	Reflect on the lesson and museum AD in general	Students reflect on their experience producing museum ADs and on lessons learned.

**Table 2.** Part 2 with a focus on production (source: authors)

Both parts of the lesson also included discussion activities to encourage students' reflections on their own visual literacy skills as well as on the social value of museum AD as an accessibility practice, and more broadly on inclusion and disability.

The materials employed were five authentic museum ADs of female portraits, which were deemed easier to interpret and describe than other subjects (e.g., abstract paintings). This choice ensured consistency in students' scripts in terms of difficulty and of focus on specific lexical areas (e.g., physical appearance, clothing, and posture).

The AD selected for the reception activities in Part 1 was produced by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York and describes the painting *Woman I* (1950–52) by Willem de Kooning. The five ADs selected for the production task were produced by the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA) and described the following paintings: *Ruth* (1933) by Nora Heysen, *Caroline Matilda Sotheron* (c.1808) by Thomas Lawrence, *The Black Watchful* (2018) by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *Circe Invidiosa* (1892) by John William Waterhouse and *Priestess of Delphi* (1891) by John Collier<sup>1</sup>. The guidelines provided during the production task preparation were created by combining existing guidelines for the creation of museum ADs (e.g., Giansante, 2015; Neves, 2015; Royal National Institute of Blind People & VocalEyes, 2003; Snyder, 2010), which were simplified for the pedagogical purposes of this lesson.

The lesson plan and materials were designed by the two researchers. The lesson was then taught in Group 2's EFL class by one of the researchers, who is also the regular course instructor of this group, and in Group 1 by this group's course instructor, who had received a training session on museum AD and on the lesson objectives and activities.

#### 4. Data collection and analysis

Data was collected using the following tools:

- in-class observations performed by a researcher as a silent observer and note-taker;
- class recordings;
- the AD scripts created by the students;
- an interview between the silent observer and the two EFL instructors to enquire about their impressions of the lesson plan and activities; their experiences in delivering the lessons; any suggested changes to the lesson plan; and their interest in including museum or other types of ADs in future classes.
- an after-class student survey with Likert-scale questions and open-ended questions (see Table 3) that focused on their perceptions of their language skills and transferable skills improvement, and their feedback on museum AD as a didactic practice.

<sup>1</sup> Available for fair use for educational purposes on the MoMA website (<https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/3?locale=en>, accessed on 25 July 2022) and the AGSA website (<https://www.agsa.sa.gov.au/accessible-guides/>, accessed on 19 November 2022).

<b>Give a score from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)</b>
<b>To what extent do you agree or disagree with each statement?</b>
I have appreciated...
Discussing the needs of people with visual disabilities
Discussing the importance of museum AD as an accessibility tool in our society
This lesson has helped me...
Reflect on the rights of people with visual disabilities
Understand the importance of making culturally relevant visual material accessible to people with visual disabilities
Improve my ability to observe and interpret an image in order to describe it later to people with visual disabilities
Write the AD of an artwork in English for someone to listen to (and not read)
Understand the importance of using language in a way that takes into account the listener's specific needs
Improve my ability to create mental images by listening to the ADs of artworks in English
Acquire specialised art-related vocabulary to describe an artwork in English
Acquire vocabulary to describe a person (physical appearance, expression, clothing)
Overall, are you satisfied with this lesson?
Have you found this lesson motivating?
Have you found this lesson challenging?
During your language courses, would you like to audio describe artworks again?
Would you like to experiment with the AD of audiovisual texts, such as videos or TV series?

**Table 3.** Survey questions (source: authors)

The survey was completed by 23 students. Of the students who completed the survey 79% attended both Parts 1 and 2 of the lesson in Group 1 and 71% in Group 2<sup>2</sup>. The students' survey data from the Likert-scale questions was analysed quantitatively in the form of mean scores out of 5 (5 being the highest value), while all the other data (i.e., survey open questions, class observations, class transcripts, interview transcripts, and AD scripts) was analysed qualitatively. Each set of data was coded separately according to a set of codes identified in advance on the basis of the research aims (Table 4).

<b>Macro-codes</b>	<b>Micro-codes</b>
<b>Language skills</b>	Vocabulary
	Listening skills
	Writing and speaking skills
<b>Transferable skills</b>	Cultural awareness and expression competence
	Social and citizenship competence

**Table 4.** Codes for data analysis (source: authors)

Among the transferable skills, cultural awareness and expression competence encompasses abilities such as visual literacy, understood as the “ability to express and interpret figurative and abstract ideas, experiences and emotions [and an understanding of] how arts and other cultural forms can be a way to both view and shape the world” (European Commission, 2019, p. 14). Social and citizenship competence refers to diversity awareness, that is, “respect for human rights” and for the “diversity of others and their needs”, as well as “critical thinking” and the ability to “feel empathy” (European Commission, 2019, pp. 11-12).

<sup>2</sup> Class attendance was not mandatory, so the number of student participants fluctuated. In Group 1, there were 25 students in Part 1 and 27 in Part 2; in Group 2, there were 11 students in Part 1 and 10 in Part 2.

From the qualitative analysis, four themes emerged about the potential contribution of museum AD to the development of the aforementioned skills. These themes are illustrated in Section 5.

## 5. Results and discussion

In this section, we illustrate the main benefits that museum AD as a pedagogical practice can bring to the language classroom. Results are organised into four main themes: empathy as a catalyst for language learning; translation as a catalyst for the development of advanced cognitive abilities, creative thinking, and cultural awareness; vocabulary exposure and acquisition; and overall appreciation and engagement. The following sub-sections focus on these themes by organically combining and discussing results that were collected through the multiple data collection tools, as detailed in Section 4. Direct citations from the participants are provided – most of them from in-class observations. When citations are not taken from in-class observations, the source is specified.

### 5.1. Empathy as a catalyst for language learning

One of the greatest values of museum AD lies in its potential to promote learners' empathy. Developing a sense of empathy towards the intended audience of museum AD – visually impaired people – seems to be the catalyst for the development of key transferable skills (e.g., sense of citizenship, critical thinking, and analytical and observational skills) as well as production skills.

Students genuinely tried to put themselves in the shoes of visually impaired people and, consequently, developed awareness about accessibility issues and the needs of people with visual impairments. Survey results showed that students generally appreciated opportunities for discussing the rights of people with disabilities, as well as for reflecting on the needs of people with visual disabilities (see Table 5).

Give a score from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) To what extent do you agree or disagree with each statement?	Mean score
<b>I have appreciated...</b>	
Discussing the needs of people with visual disabilities	4.1/5
Discussing the importance of museum AD as an accessibility practice in our society	4.1/5
<b>This lesson has helped me...</b>	
Reflect on the rights of people with visual disabilities	3.9/5
Understand the importance of making culturally relevant visual material accessible to people with visual disabilities	4.1/5
Improve my ability to observe and interpret an image in order to describe it later to people with visual disabilities	4.2/5
Write the AD of an artwork in English for someone to listen to (and not read)	4.0/5
Understand the importance of using language in a way that takes into account the listener's specific needs	4.6/5

**Table 5.** Survey results regarding empathy (source: authors)

For instance, a student claimed, "It's a bit hard because you have to forget that you can actually look at [the painting]" and that "you cannot take for granted all the things that we take for granted". Another student added that she "tried really hard to put myself into it, and as a blind person and what she would be saying, and I would like to have a lot of detail because I cannot

see ... in order to have a clear image.” A third student recognized that AD “reminds us we are really lucky to be able to see.” Instructor 2 claimed that “the added value of AD compared to other listening products lies in putting yourself in someone else’s shoes and learning how to communicate in a way that you’re not used to because of some constraints” (interview). It was thus important for the instructor “to make sure that they [students] see the value” (interview). Interestingly, the visually impaired student shared the following reflection:

I never understood how much, as a visually impaired person, I was using my sight. I think it’s interesting to see how small details you don’t even think about. If you’re with a blind person, you need to tell them. I found it interesting to put myself in somebody else’s skin and see, even if I’m visually impaired, how blind people can deal with art.

This emerging sense of empathy arguably stimulated students’ expression of authentic emotional responses, critical thinking, and sense of citizenship. Students learned to appreciate the importance of museum AD in today’s society and of making culturally relevant visual material accessible to people with visual disabilities (see Table 5). During the reception activities, students critically reflected on AD features that would offer the best possible experience for this audience by genuinely reacting to and expressing constructive criticism of the AD products. Students in both groups commented on “the voice of the narrator” and on “the way of narrating”, which seemed to be “lacking something on a more emotional or emotive level”, as suggested by Instructor 1. They were “expecting something more involving, more artistic, more poetic”. Some students thought “it wasn’t complete”, as they were “also expecting background music or sounds”. Students also observed that the AD listened to in Part 1 lacked “extra elements that were not just merely the way it was painted”, such as an introduction at the beginning providing more context, a description of the setting surrounding the subject, or more technical details (e.g., specific shades), and that “for a blind person it’s not fair to get only this”. Generally, students expected the AD “to be more specific and detailed” than a standard audio guide, providing information “not only about the light or colours or the scene in general, but also about the atmosphere and the feeling of the painting”, as well as symbolical meanings about the position of the figures depicted. For instance, a student “had the image that [the artwork is] creepy, but I don’t feel it [from the AD]. I think you should feel the same as abled people”. Further evidence is provided by Instructor 2, who recognized the students’ frustration with the AD they listened to, but argued that it “led to an interesting discussion, as this is not the kind of class that needs to provoke just positive feelings” (interview). What Instructor 2 “mostly liked about these lessons is that they gave students the opportunity to really think in an authentic way, which made this educational at a deeper level”. This evidence suggests that these critical observations activated oral discussion skills. Museum AD became the object of students’ discussions, as opposed to a mere tool to improve their English skills. This, in turn, enabled learners to activate and use speaking skills and strategies to authentically express criticism, opinions, (dis)agreement, suggestions and, more generally, feelings.

Writing skills were also positively affected. More specifically, the process of developing empathy stimulated a sense of citizenship, critical thinking and discussions which raised learners’ awareness about the importance of writing for an audience. The writing task on museum AD allowed students to make the target audience (i.e., visually impaired people) and their needs central to the writing process. During the production task, students carefully observed and analysed their paintings and attempted to include what they perceived as desirable AD features in their own museum ADs with the aim of improving the experience of a visually impaired audience. This, in turn, led them to exploit the specific language strategies and resources for drafting a product that could be appreciated by these recipients, such as content

organisation (e.g., the order in which a subject is described, what information to include or exclude), vocabulary use (e.g., descriptive and expressive language, art-related terminology), and creative writing strategies (e.g., interpreting the subject of the painting; using analogies, comparisons, and imagery; employing different language structures to avoid repetitions).

Examples of features used by students include background and contextual information such as the following:

- information about the artists and their styles, and elements of the story of Circe to explain the portrait *Circe Invidiosa* (e.g., “the main subject of the painting is the demigoddess Circe... According to Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, the demigoddess was jealous of the love between Glauco, Poseidon’s son, and the beautiful nymph Silla”);
- personal pronouns (e.g., “we are in deep, dense, dark woods”);
- descriptive and expressive language (e.g., “her facial expression evokes seriousness and austerity”; “dark eyebrows crowning her big eyes”);
- art-specific vocabulary (e.g., “the artist used natural light and smooth side strokes”; “splash of blue”);
- interpretations of the artwork (e.g., “the contrast between her pale skin and her t-shirt also reflects the contrast between the landscape and the sky in the background”);
- analogies (e.g., “the painting comes in a door-like size”).

In addition, during the lesson, Instructor 2 stressed that “writing is *for the reader*”, and that AD ultimately “helps us become more aware of the writer’s role and the recipient’s role – whether it’s a reader or a listener.” In the interview, Instructor 2 further supported the usefulness of museum AD to develop the ability to write for an audience by stating that museum AD was “probably the ultimate type of writing” to teach and practice this concept, and by expressing the intention to incorporate elements of AD in future writing classes. Similarly, Instructor 1 noticed that if a text is “also been made pleasurable to read, and it’s easier if it’s readable, then it opens up the audience and it sort of makes that information more widely accessible” (interview). Also, according to Instructor 1, “learning how to describe something clearly from a different perspective than what you’re used to [means] shifting your ability to describe”, which may ultimately contribute to “improving your analytical skills [and] observation skills” (interview).

Interestingly, students’ perceptions aligned with the instructors’. Most respondents felt they improved their visual literacy skills (e.g., abstraction and concentration, critical and analytical skills, as well as descriptive and creative skills), by observing and interpreting an image in order to describe it later to people with visual disabilities (see Table 5). Writing skills and social skills were also perceived as improved – more specifically writing the AD of an artwork in English for someone to listen to and not read, and using language in a way that takes into account the listener’s specific needs (see Table 5). A student even claimed that AD is “more useful for people who can see than people who cannot see”, as “it helps us keep in mind the listener.”

After the AD presentation task, students generally appreciated the ADs created by their classmates more than the AD listened to in Part 1 of the lesson. They mainly appreciated the style being “more realistic for all the paintings”, the higher level of detail, as well as the expressive and “involving” style, such as the use of the first-person pronoun in the description. Instructor 1 thought that students were “beginning to understand and appreciate what was involved in both sides”, that is, in AD production and reception. Students were developing “empathy towards... people who were in a different position from them while trying to create that sort of sense of equality” by seeking to provide the best possible description (interview). In the instructor’s opinion, not only may this help students “understand and interact with

people who come from those communities” but it could even inspire students “to get into that kind of work” in the future (interview).

Finally, it can also be argued that museum AD is particularly useful to reflect on the relationship between author and audience in written texts. Written English tends to be more audience-oriented than Italian, and this difference is reflected in elements such as organisation of ideas, text structure, and tone (Bortoluzzi, 1998). Instructor 2 observed that the constraints of museum AD inherently forced students to become acutely and authentically aware of their audience, significantly more so than when they write texts for a “standard” readership.

## 5.2. Translation as a catalyst for the development of cognitive skills, creative thinking and cultural awareness

Similarly to other types of didactic AD (Bausells-Espín, 2022), museum AD seems to contribute to developing cognitive as well as creative skills in sighted individuals by requiring listeners to translate verbal input into mental images. This process also contributes to raising cultural awareness and to challenging our worldviews by uncovering biases and assumptions.

Results showed that museum AD may benefit the development of oral reception skills. The added value of listening to a museum AD for sighted students lies in the opportunity to form a mental image that resembles as closely as possible to an existing image by receiving oral input exclusively. This requires – and, arguably, develops – more advanced cognitive efforts than other listening products normally do, such as piecing together different types of discrete details (e.g., descriptive, interpretative, expressive elements) to build a bigger picture (both literally and metaphorically). Students felt they improved their ability to create mental images by listening to ADs of artworks in English (see Table 6).

Give a score from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) To what extent do you agree or disagree?	Mean score
This lesson has helped me...	
Improve my ability to create mental images by listening to the ADs of artworks in English	3.7/5

**Table 6.** Survey results regarding translation (source: authors)

During the lesson, students said they were “able to form a mental picture” but were “a bit confused”, for instance, about the colours or about specific parts of the painting, such as the woman’s face and torso. In addition, they could “imagine some elements but it’s difficult to imagine the whole painting”. On the same vein, Instructor 1 noticed that “it was a different kind of listening, especially in a creative way, which is also something that doesn’t necessarily get explored in lessons fully” (interview). This could be considered as “a different level of listening because it was forcing them [students] to listen even more carefully than they ordinarily would” (interview). Consequently, AD involved “a much higher listening skill and a much higher burden on listening” (interview).

Listening to or reading a museum AD seems to also foster imagination and creative thinking. Instructors and students commented that listening to an AD (or reading its script) may be compared to reading a book or listening to an audiobook, whereby the recipient activates their imagination and creative thinking to “see” what is described more than they would do when observing a painting or watching a film. During the lesson, Instructor 2 stressed that “the physical objective description is done through a very rich detailed language... pretty much like when you read a novel or a literary work: through the use of language, it evokes a certain feeling.” Following a student’s comment about AD being “like reading a book rather than watching a film”, Instructor 1 noticed that “we praise books over films, but we don’t praise

audio descriptions over works of visual art” and wondered about “Why should it be that art needs to be only visual as in ‘see’... when you can see it with your mind?” During the interview, a reflection also emerged about the fact that looking at a painting “makes us not necessarily lazy but... not involved in the creation of that image, whereas AD could be a way of engaging more [in] a three- or four-dimensional kind of experience”.

Finally, as far as cultural awareness and expression are concerned, museum AD provided the opportunity to bring preconceptions and cultural biases to the surface, challenging them from different perspectives. Following the listening activities, students discussed the differences between the portrait of a woman described in the AD and their mental images of such portrait. Students did not seem to recognise a woman in the painting, as it seemed “more a sketch” or “a soldier”. This allowed Instructor 2 to raise their awareness not just about “what can be done in the AD to guide the listener” but also on “preconceptions that we have based on who we are, what we know about the world, how we see the world”, for example about the image of a woman. Instructor 2 found it “funny that some of them were so adamant about that woman not being a woman” (interview). Similarly, a student said that apart from the woman’s face, they imagined a completely different body, also adding that “if you don’t specify that [the body is very square] you automatically think of a *normal* body, especially if you describe the breasts being round.” Another student “expected a more elegant pose.” These comments suggest preconceptions about the representation of the female body and provide fertile ground for discussions about biases.

### 5.3. Vocabulary exposure and acquisition

Overall, museum AD material provided exposure to and opportunities for the acquisition of vocabulary that can be useful to high-intermediate and advanced language learners (B2–C1 CEFR levels). Students felt they improved their vocabulary, including specialised art-related vocabulary and, to a lesser extent, specific vocabulary to describe a person, including physical appearance, expression, and clothing (see Table 7).

Give a score from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) To what extent do you agree or disagree with each statement?	Mean score
This lesson has helped me...	
Acquire specialised art-related vocabulary to describe an artwork in English	3.9/5
Acquire vocabulary to describe a person (physical appearance, expression, clothing)	3.5/5

**Table 7.** Survey results regarding vocabulary (source: authors)

These domains apply to the paintings selected for this lesson plan (portraits), but paintings on different subjects (e.g., landscapes or still lives) would provide opportunities for the development of different vocabulary. Students reflected on art-related terminology (e.g., “portrait”; “painting” instead of “picture”), collocations (“oil on canvas”), descriptive and expressive language (e.g., “teeth are bared in a rigid grin”), and identified unknown terminology (e.g., “bulging breasts”, “perched”). Instructor 1 thought the task required students to use “more sophisticated vocabulary in order to convey something that ordinarily they wouldn’t convey” (interview). Along the same lines, Instructor 2 told students that AD offers “an opportunity to expand our vocabulary and see how something can be described – in a more basic way or richer, more expressive way.”

## 6. Appreciation and engagement

Overall, students seemed satisfied with the lesson, as they found it motivating albeit challenging (see Table 8). This lesson seems to have raised the students' interest in AD: some of them would like to audio describe again, also by experimenting with the AD of audiovisual texts, such as videos or TV series (see Table 8).

Give a score from 1 (not at all) to 5 (absolutely yes)	Mean score
Overall, are you satisfied with this lesson?	4.6/5
Have you found this lesson motivating?	4.3/5
Have you found this lesson challenging?	3.8/5
During your language courses, would you like to audio describe artworks again?	3.4/5
Would you like to experiment with the AD of audiovisual texts, such as videos or TV series?	4.3/5

**Table 8.** Survey results regarding appreciation and engagement (source: authors)

Throughout the lesson students engaged in lively discussions, expressing their preferences (e.g., style of art and favourite artworks, artists or museums), talking about past experiences in museums, as well as reacting to and commenting on the features, values and drawbacks of museum AD. Students from both groups also showed high levels of participation during the production tasks, with teams actively engaging in analysing the paintings, doing research and delving in animated discussions over their interpretations, terminology and information to include. In Group 2, the instructor even extended the task duration as students were eager to properly complete their work. During the interviews, both instructors commented that the lesson “was a very positive experience”, “motivating” and “stimulating”. Although they recognised the lesson plan was too long for the time allocated, they were satisfied with it and appreciated that students were “active” and “quite engaged” (interviews). Instructor 2 was “pretty prepared for them not to like the way the AD was structured”, while Instructor 1 seemed more surprised to hear a student’s comment “against the notion” of AD but argued that students “still took a lot from the lesson”, as they reflected on AD deeply (interviews).

From a FLE perspective, this study findings align with action-oriented-approach principles (Council of Europe, 2001; Piccardo & North, 2019). Museum AD provides authentic material to create real-life scenarios and tasks that, by presenting specific constraints (e.g., visually impaired audience; translating visual content into oral products and vice versa), require learners to activate competences that end up being further developed in the process. In addition, the social value of museum AD makes it an ideal tool to create the conditions in which learners react and act meaningfully and authentically as social agents to reach a real-life goal. In this study, learners’ emotions triggered social agency, confirming the importance of the emotional dimension in language education (Piccardo & Aden, 2014). Empathy – fostered by the exposure to museum AD and the acknowledgement of its social value – emerged as a driving force that positively affected cognition, intercultural skills and, ultimately, language learning. As Instructor 2 pointed out, “we learn by being uncomfortable”, and “the useful thing about a task... is that there are constraints. And those constraints are real” (interview). In this case, it was not just about describing a picture, but about trying to describe it to someone who cannot see. As such, students “were able to point out what made the task challenging. And then, inevitably, they had to think about strategies to compensate” (interview), which ultimately helped them make their descriptions more accurate and develop the skills discussed in the sub-sections above.

## 7. Conclusions

This exploratory study aimed to shed light on the pedagogical potential of museum AD in FLE. A task-based lesson was designed and delivered within an EFL course, and data about students' and instructors' perceptions, as well as classroom activities, was collected and analysed to identify the benefits that museum AD might offer for the development of language and transferable skills.

Overall, participants appreciated the lessons and perceived their usefulness for improving FL skills. The most significant findings concern the roles of empathy and translation as catalysts for the development of sense of citizenship, cultural awareness, critical and creative thinking, and analytical and observational skills that, in turn, enhance language skills.

These results are not generalisable due to the small number (N=40) and homogenous profiles of the student participants. Timing was also a limitation, as more than two classes are needed to fully exploit the potential of museum AD activities. These limitations call for further longer-term experimental studies involving a larger number of participants. A wider sample could include students with different language backgrounds, ages, and proficiency levels. A study design with pre- and post-tests as well as treatment and control groups would also contribute to validating the didactic value of museum AD by measuring students' learning as a result of AD activities.

Based on our pilot study, suggestions for practitioners include devoting an entire course to didactic museum AD and using multiple examples of authentic ADs to increase students' exposure to different features and allow for critical comparisons. Proposed classroom applications include terminology-focused activities through controlled practice to foster vocabulary learning; students' revisions and improvement of authentic museum ADs; production of original ADs with a focus on writing for an audience and creative writing; oral performance of museum ADs focusing on pace, intonation, and expressive spoken skills; and debates on inclusion and diversity issues, or on themes emerging from the artworks described.

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