Explaining Artwork and Writing Artist Statements in an ESOL Course
── A Study at a Visual Arts University ──

英語で美術作品の説明とアーティストステートメント制作
── 美術大学の ESOL 授業における研究 ──

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美術作品を言葉で説明することは、アートに関わる分野の人にとって重要なスキルであると広く考えられている。他言語で作品を説明できるようになることは、彼らの活躍の場を広げることにつながる可能性がある。本研究の目的は、日本の美術大学における ESOL（英語を母語としない人のための英語）授業カリキュラムの構築である。研究対象授業では、学生は、先行研究（Fukao、2023）で明らかになった美術を説明するための単語を学び、美術作品を説明するなどの演習を行った。また、最終課題では、学生自身のアーティストステートメントを作成した。授業の 1 回目と 14 回目に、学生にアンケート調査を実施し、英作文を回収した。それらの分析結果からは、授業内容は学生にとって、英語でアートを説明する能力の向上と、その能力に自信がつき、提供された語彙はある程度役に立ったものの、自分の作品を説明するのに必要な単語の大部分は個別に学習する必要があることが明らかになった。

Explaining visual art verbally is widely considered to be an important skill for people in the creative field, and the ability to describe their art in another language could help artists expand their opportunities. The present study was conducted in an ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) course at an art university in Japan to help develop the course curriculum. Students were taught a list of vocabulary related to speaking about art identified in a previous study (Fukao, 2023) and various classroom activities were conducted to gain practice explaining art. The final project was writing individual artist statements. A survey was conducted both at the beginning and end of the course, and student writing was collected at both times. Analysis of the survey and student writing shows that the class content was helpful for building skills and confidence in explaining art in English, and that although the vocabulary was helpful to some extent, the bulk of the words required to explain original art need to be learned on an individual basis.

Keywords
ESOL, art university, artist statements, explaining student artwork, speaking about art in English, English for Specific Purposes

1.0. Introduction

Explaining visual artwork verbally is not a simple task, and it becomes even more difficult when attempting to do so in a language other than one's native language. For people in the creative field, it has become commonplace to be expected to produce verbal statements about the art they create, including comments to accompany pieces in exhibitions, proposals for projects, write-ups on websites and social media, and more. One important form of writing about an artist's work is the "artist statement." Fallon explains that "These statements are often used for promotional reasons, but they also provide insight into an artist's body of work" (Fallon, 2019, p. 40). As an ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) educator of future artists, I believe it is essential to provide students with relevant English vocabulary, skills, and training to help them speak and write about their original art and write their artist statements to better equip them to succeed in the art world. The present study was conducted at a visual arts university with students enrolled in the elective ESOL class "English for Artists." Vocabulary related to speaking about original art identified in a previous study conducted at the same university (Fukao, 2023) was used in the present study and incorporated into the coursework. This study will address the following question:

How can an educator help ESOL students majoring in art explain their original artwork and write their "Artist Statements" in English?

2.0. Literature Review

2.1. What is an Artist Statement?

Hocking (2021) defines an artist statement as "a short text that typically provides a written description of an artist's creative intentions" (Hocking, 2021, p. 103). Sato and Miyamoto list five questions an artist statement should answer: "What artistic activities are you engaged in?" "Why do you create your art?" "How do you create it?" "What influenced you the most?" and "How do you want the viewer to understand it?" (Sato and Miyamoto, 2018). Numerous guides on writing artist statements can be found both in print and online. Hocking examined 25 online "how to" guides and found that while many of the guides gave contradictory advice about style and other elements, artist statements were found to have five functions in common: "expressing identity," "conceptualizing function," "specifying motivation," "identifying the effect on the viewer," and "identifying creative processes and materials" (Hocking, 2021, p. 107).

2.2. Importance of Artist Statements and Verbal Expression of Artwork

According to Hocking, artist statements are important for artists in the professional world for such purposes as

accompanying exhibitions, funding applications, and on an artist's website (Hocking, 2021). Mead says that art-related writing such as artist statements, artist biographies, and grant proposals "can actively create opportunities for artistic and occupational successes" (Mead, 2021, p. 34). Specht examined the effect artist statements had on viewers and found in his study that "After reading the artist's statement, participants indicated that the representational artwork was more 'interesting' and that they 'liked' it more compared to participants who were not presented with the artist's statements" (Specht, 2008, p. 13). In a later study, Specht suggests that "If the visual experience can be enhanced with a carefully written statement, the artist might be able to more effectively market his or her work" (Specht, 2010, p. 202).

2.3. Teaching Art-Related Writing

For students studying visual art, Hocking asserts that "learning to write an artist's statement is also a crucial part of art education" (Hocking, 2021, p. 103). This sentiment is shared by Mead. In his study about teaching writing for artists, he points out that teaching the skill of writing artist statements, artist biographies, and grant proposals is often neglected in curriculums, and that helping students learn these skills will increase their chances of success (Mead, 2021). Moreover, he explains that teaching art-related writing is motivating to students both intrinsically, "because they tie into the students' personal interests and creativity," and extrinsically, "because they offer real world motivators like artistic opportunities" (Mead, 2021, p. 33).

3.0. Method

Subjects of the study were students enrolled in a fourteen-week elective ESOL course with a focus on speaking and writing about art in English at a visual arts university. Over the course of the semester, vocabulary from a previous study that identified words used for talking about original art (Fukao, 2023) was taught and used in class materials. In addition, various classroom activities were conducted to practice speaking and writing about artwork. As a final project, students wrote their original artist statements in English. A survey was conducted both at the beginning and at the end of the course to assess students' reactions and gain feedback, and student writing, collected at the beginning and end of the course, was analyzed using KH Coder text mining software (Version 3.Beta.07d.).

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were nine students at a visual arts university enrolled in an elective ESOL class with a focus on speaking and writing about art in English. About half of the participants (55.5 %) were juniors, 33.3 % were freshmen, and 11.1 % were seniors. Five of the six university departments were represented: 33.3 % were in the Illustration Department, 22.2 % in

the Fine Arts Department, 22.2 % in the Media Design Department, 11.1 % in the Integrated Studies Department, and 11.1 % in the Spatial Design Department. Just over half the students (55.5 %) were based in Japan, and the remaining 44.4 % were overseas students from Indonesia, Malaysia, and the People's Republic of China. None of them were native English speakers, and their English levels ranged from lower-intermediate to high. All of them had a strong interest in learning art-related English and were highly motivated.

3.2. Surveys

The first survey was taken at the beginning of the course via a Google form. Students' permission was obtained through a checkbox on the form, and students were assured both orally and in writing that their answers would be used for research only, that no personally identifiable information would be collected, and that their answers would not affect their grade for the course in any way.

The survey asked students if they feel they know enough English vocabulary to express their thoughts about art in English, and how confident they feel when talking about art in English using five-point Likert scale questions. It also asked what obstacles they encounter when speaking about art in English using a checkbox question. The final question was an essay question that asked students to write about their artwork.

The second survey was taken at the end of the course, also via a Google form. Students' permission to use both their survey answers and their final writing assignment (their artist statements) was obtained through a checkbox on the survey. Students were again assured both orally and in writing that their answers would be used for research only, that no personally identifiable information would be collected, and that their answers would not affect their grade for the course in any way.

This survey included five-point Likert scale questions asking whether they feel they had become better able to speak about art in English, whether they feel more confident speaking about art in English, and whether the course vocabulary words helped them. It also included checkbox questions asking what classroom activities helped them the most, what they thought was needed the most when learning to speak about art in English, and what was the most difficult part for them.

It should be noted that eleven students answered the first survey, but only nine answered the second survey because two students did not complete the course. The surveys were conducted anonymously, so the two extra sets of responses could not be separated from the others and have thus been included in the data.

3.3. Class Content and Activities
3.3.1. *Vocabulary*

The vocabulary used in this study is taken from a previous study that identified words for talking about original art for use in

ESOL classes for art majors by analyzing graduating student comments about their graduation pieces (Fukao, 2023). The words consisted of 150 of the most frequent words from the combined departments, and an additional 380 of the most frequent words from the six departments of the university, for a total of 530 words.

The list contained many common beginning-level English words that students taking an intermediate English course would likely already have learned, and so it was shortened using the following method.

First, words appearing in the Oxford English Dictionary's list of the 100 most common words in the English language (OED, 2011) were removed (33 words). This OED list is based on an analysis of English writing from around the world and includes the most frequently used basic words such as "I," "have," "what," "like," and "this."

Next, words commonly taught early in the language learning process were removed. Countless textbooks and teaching materials are available for beginning-level English, and each would of course have slightly different vocabulary content, however for this research, the glossary of a commonly-used Japanese government-approved first year junior high school (seventh grade) textbook (Kasajima et al, 2024) was used to identify vocabulary that would likely have been learned by students at the beginning levels of study. Students who went through the Japanese education system would have been taught most of these beginning-level words, and overseas students taking intermediate-level university ESOL classes are likely to have been taught a similar set of beginning-level words. Using the glossary, words appearing in the textbook were removed from the list (131 words), including "color," "boy," "flower," "house," and "music."

Finally, words that are the same in both languages were removed (55 words). Words that are the same in both languages would likely already be known by students living in Japan. These words included "character," "page," "manga," "robot," and "fashion."

After removing these three sets of basic-level words, 310 words remained on the list. During the short length of the course, it would be difficult to teach even this reduced number of words. So, from among these, 137 words were selected and either taught explicitly or used in classroom materials over the 14-week course (see Appendix A).

The words were selected from the modified list based primarily on their relevance to the content of the syllabus. Words in four categories were prioritized. First, words that could be used for "producing art" were selected, for example, "create" and "depict." Next, words used for "describing art" were selected, for example, "abstract," "composition," and "realistic." Then, words related to "mental creative processes," which include perceiving things, reflecting on them, and imagining were selected, for example, "notice," "curiosity," and "consider." Finally, words related to "communicating through art" were selected, including "convey," "express," and "come out." It was conjectured that words in these

four categories could be used in a wide variety of comments about original artwork. On the other hand, words on the list that could be categorized as being used for "specific themes and motifs" were not selected, for example, "spider web," "parental home," "orchid," and "skipjack tuna." Themes and motifs tend to be unique to each artist, and thus the words to describe specific pieces would be useful to a smaller number of students.

In addition to the 137 words selected from the list, approximately 52 additional words (not appearing on the list) were also taught during the course as they were needed in relation to the content on the syllabus (see Appendix B), for a total of 187 words. Among the additions were "sculpture," "background," "transform," "speech balloon," and "focal point."

3.3.2. *Authentic Input: Listening and Reading*

Authentic listening and reading practice activities were included as part of the course. For the listening input, short videos, including talks and interviews with real artists, were shown in class. For the reading input, students were given short readings that included explanations of art and quotes from real life historical and modern artists. After watching and/or reading, students discussed the content and expressed their opinions about it.

3.3.3. *Guided Output: Speaking and Writing*

Students were given regular practice describing and expressing their opinions about works of art both orally and in writing. For the classroom speaking exercises, pictures of famous works of art in the public domain from a variety of genres were printed out and laminated. Students were instructed to freely choose a picture card from the table and ask and answer a series of questions about it in pairs. Each week focused on a different form of art: painting, sculpture, photography, installation art, picture books, advertisement posters, and more. Questions were provided by the instructor and varied each week according to the topic. Some examples include: "Describe the painting" "Why did you choose this card?" "Do you think this ad poster is effective? Explain" and "How does this installation art make you feel?". They then chose another card and repeated the process. After speaking about several cards, students were asked to choose one last card (it could be one they had already spoken about) and write out their answers on a worksheet.

Additionally, in one of the lessons, students were instructed to bring in a picture of one of their original works of art and speak about it in pairs.

3.3.4. *Writing Artist Statements*

The final three weeks of the course were focused on preparing for, writing, and sharing students' artist statements, building on what was learned in previous classes.

The lesson plan for this segment was modeled on the one

outlined in Mead's guide, "Artist Statement Writing: Guide for Instructors," on his website (Mead, 2021). Although the focus of his guide was on native English-speaking high school students, many of the steps and activities it described could be adapted for ESOL learners.

First, students were introduced to the concept of an "artist statement." They were then given a list of questions to answer about their original artwork to help them formulate their ideas. Questions included: "What materials do you use?" "How is your work unique?" "What are you trying to convey through your art?" and so on.

Next, they read professional artist statements and analyzed them to understand what types of information they contained and how they were written. A selection of authentic artist statements from historical and modern artists were printed out and laminated for students to read. Some printable samples were provided on Mead's website (2021), and others were added from the public domain on the Internet. Students read several of the cards and checked off on a checklist the type of information each card contained, for example, "information about the artist's life," "information about materials used," and "explanation of the message of the artwork." Through this task, students were able to discover what basic type of content tends to be included in an artist statement. Moreover, students were able to form a mental image of what an artist statement is like in English.

Next, they wrote the rough drafts of their artist statements during class using their answers to the set of questions they answered earlier as a base. The content of their artist statements was left completely up to them. They were told they could include or not include any of their answers to the questions, and that they could add anything else they wished. The overall length was not specified, as long as it conveyed a coherent message about their art. In the following class, students were given individual feedback from the instructor (grammar corrections, etc.), and were given time to rewrite their artist statements and make a digital copy.

The final step was to read their artist statements aloud to their partners and give each other feedback. They changed partners several times and repeated the process. The instructor observed the peer feedback to be positive and encouraging.

4.0. Results

4.1. Beginning of Course Survey

In the survey given at the beginning of the course, students were asked whether they know enough art-related English words to be able to express their thoughts about art in English (fig. 1). The majority (63.6 %) gave a negative response: "I don't know very many English words about art and can't express my thoughts about art" or "I don't know any English words about art and can't express my thoughts about art at all." Only 27.3 % of the answers were positive, with no one giving the highest positive response, "I

kow enough English words about art to freely express my thoughts about art."
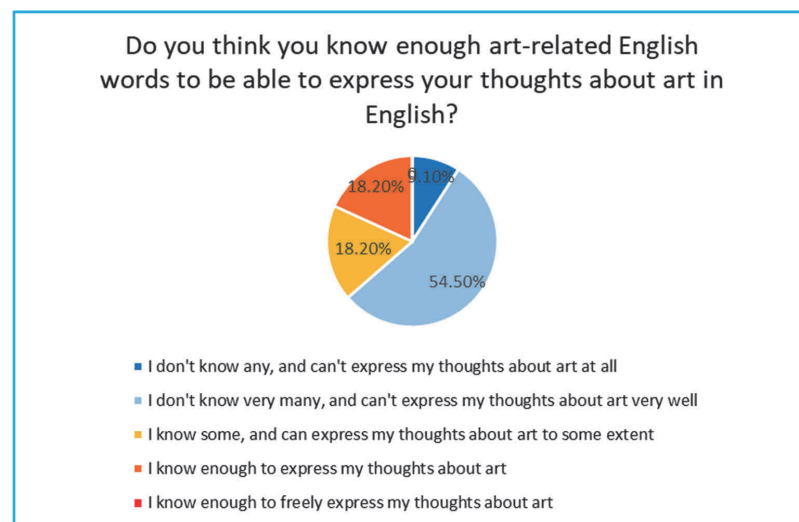

Figure 1.

Students were asked what their main obstacle is when they try to express their thoughts about art in English (fig. 2), using a checkbox with multiple answers allowed. "Lack of English vocabulary" was tied with "weak at English grammar" as the top answer (63.6 % each), with "pronnciation is difficult" in third place at 36.4 % (no other responses were given).
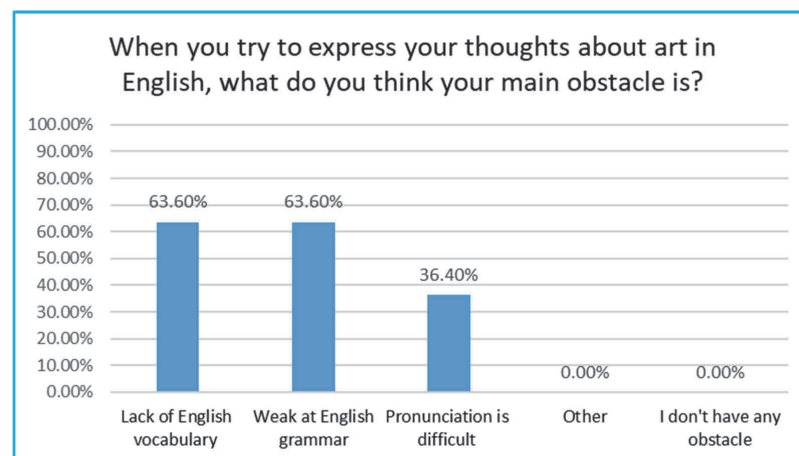

Figure 2.

Next, students were asked "How confident do you feel that you can express your thoughts about art in English?" (fig. 3). Only 36.4 % answered that they felt "confident" or "confident to some extent." The majority (63.6 %) answered that they "don't feel very confident" or "don't feel confident at all." No one said that they feel "very confident."

The final question, an essay question that asked students to freely write about their original art, is discussed in the student writing section in 4.3.
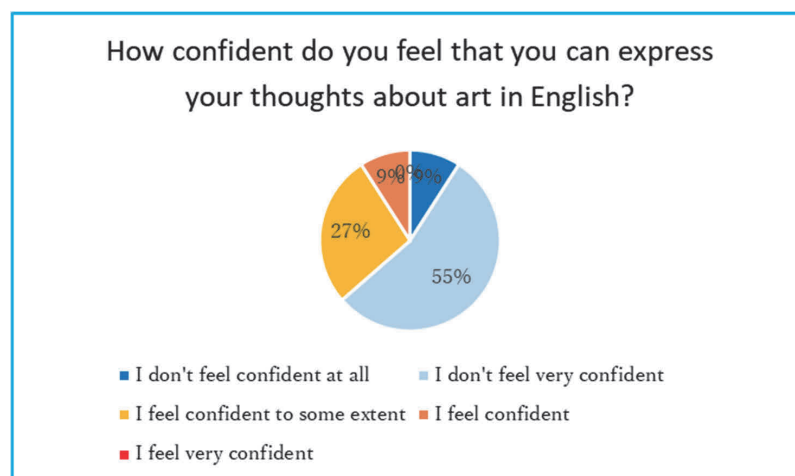
Figure 3.

4.2. End of Course Survey

In the end of course survey, students were asked whether they feel more confident about speaking/writing about art in English (fig. 4) compared to at the beginning of the course. All responses (100 %) were positive, with 55.6 % saying that they feel much more confident, 22.2 % that they feel more confident, and the remaining 22.2 % that they feel more confident to some extent. This is a marked contrast with the beginning of course survey, in which only 36.4 % gave a positive response and the majority (63.6 %) gave a negative response, showing that students' feeling of confidence in their ability to talk about art in English has risen.
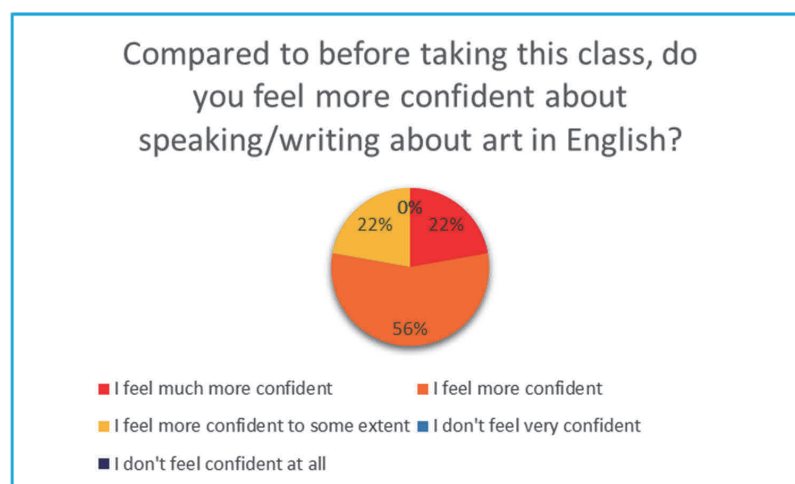

Figure 4.

Students were asked whether they feel that they have become better able to speak and write about art in English, both for art in general and for their own art (fig. 5). All responded positively to both questions with either "I really think so" or "I think so a little." However, becoming better able to explain "your own art" was given a slightly higher score than for "art in general."

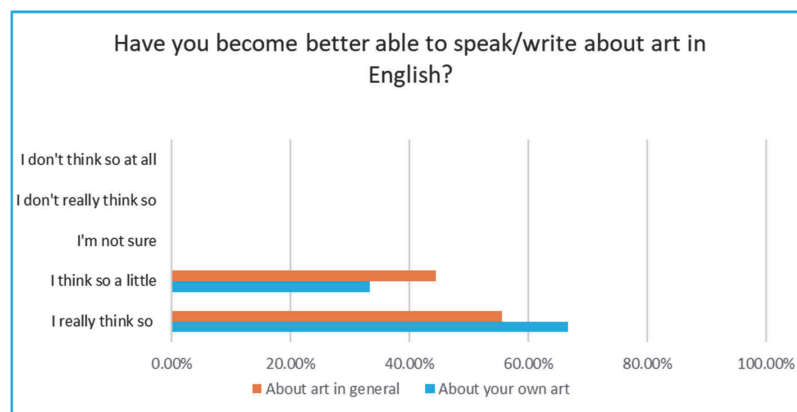**Have you become better able to speak/write about art in English?**

Figure 5.

Students were also asked whether the vocabulary learned in class helped them to speak and write about art in general, and to explain their own art (fig. 6). All responses were positive, with either "it helped a lot" or "it helped a little." However, there was a higher percentage of the highest mark on the scale "it helped a lot" for speaking about "art in general" than for "your own art"

Did the vocabulary we learned in class help you to speak/write about art in English?
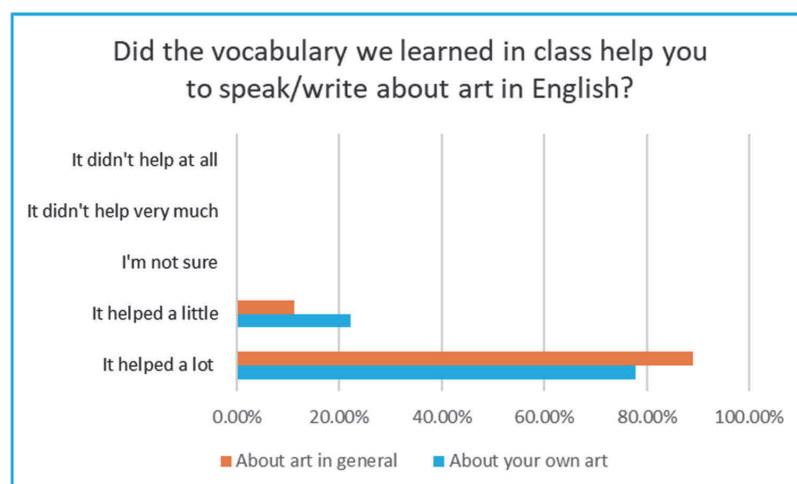
Figure 6.

For the three following questions, multiple answers were allowed. Students were asked what other classroom activities besides vocabulary helped them the most (fig. 7). The top answer given was "speaking about various kinds of famous artwork" (88.9 %), followed by "one to one advice and comments from the teacher" (66.%).
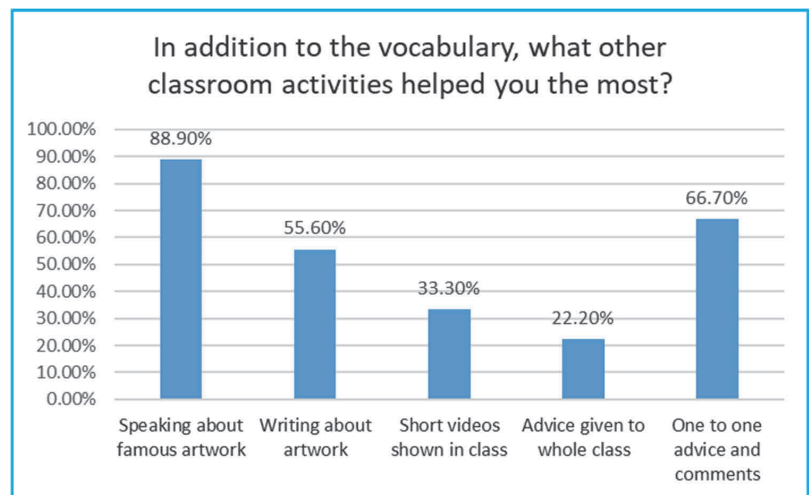
Figure 7.

When asked what was needed most to become better at speaking/writing about art in English in the future (fig. 8), the top answer was "learn more vocabulary" (88.9 %), followed by a three-way tie with "more speaking practice," "learning more model sentences," and "learning more grammar" (66.7 % ech).
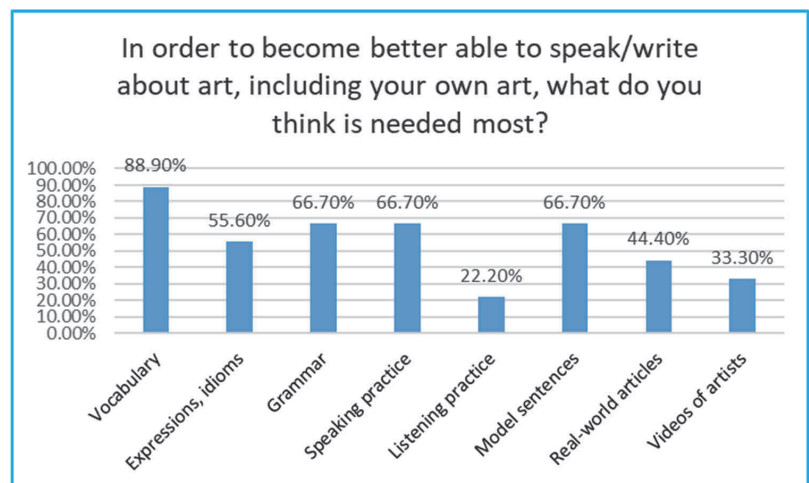

Figure 8.

When asked what the most difficult part was about learning to speak/write about art in English (fig. 9), "vocabulary" was the top answer given (77.8 %), followed by "expressions and idioms" (66.7 %). It is interesting to note that while the students claimed vocabulary to be the most difficult aspect of the learning process, they also acknowledged it to be needed the most.
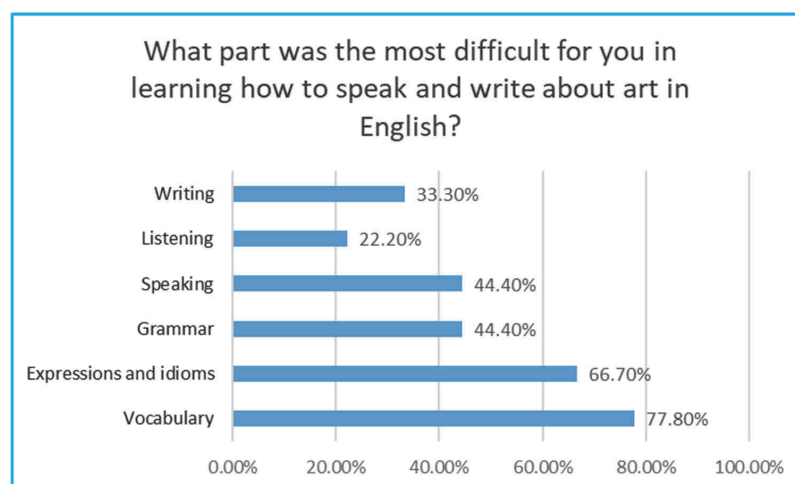
Figure 9.

4.3. Student Writing

Student responses to the writing question in the survey given on the first day of the course, "Tell me about your art: the materials and techniques you use, the concepts, context, themes, what inspired you, etc.," were compared with the final writing assignment, "Your Artist Statement," handed in on the last day of class.

First, the average length of each student's writing, measured in number of words, was compared. The average total word count of the beginning of course survey essays was 61.7 words, and the average word count of the end of course artist statements was 123.7 words, an increase of 200.3 % (approximately double).

Next, the students' writing was analyzed using KH Coder text mining software (Version 3.Beta.07d.) to obtain a frequency list of the words it contained. The default settings were used, with proper nouns and foreign words excluded.

First, it was found that 46.6 % of the words in the beginning of course writing were beginning-level words, i.e. they appeared in either the OED list of the 100 most common words (Oxford, 2011) or in the junior high school textbook glossary (Kasajima et al., 2024), or they were words that are the same in both languages. In the end of course writing, however, only 33.2 % of the words were found to be beginning-level words according to this classification. It can be seen that compared to their writing at the beginning of the course, student writing at the end of the course contained significantly fewer beginning-level words.

Next, the words were compared with the course vocabulary list. In the beginning of course writing, 21.9 % of the words used appeared on the course vocabulary list. The fact that words in the yet-to-be taught list were already being used to talk about original art points to their relevance to the task. It also makes it clear that some of the students already knew some of the words before they were presented in class. The end of course writing contained a similar amount (23.8 %) of course vocabulary words. This also points to the relevance of the words to the task and

shows that students were utilizing the vocabulary presented in the course; however, it is not clear whether they already knew the words or not.

It is also important to note that the remaining 31.5 % of the words used in the beginning of course writing, and 43.0 % of the words used in the end of course writing were not part of the course vocabulary and not beginning-level words (as defined above). It can be assumed that students had either already learned these words in the past or had looked them up on their own for the purpose of this writing task.

Additionally, the author observed an improvement in style and quality of the end of course writing as compared to that at the beginning of the course; however, this was not measured.

5.0. Conclusion

When speaking and writing about original art in any educational setting, it must be kept in mind that each artist's work is one-of-a-kind, and that in order to explain it and write an "artist statement," the words and expressions needed will necessarily be different for each individual artist.

The results of the surveys show that all students in the present study reported becoming better able to speak and write about art in English compared to at the beginning of the course, especially about their own art. Moreover, all students reported feeling more confident in their ability to speak and write about art compared to at the beginning of the course.

The course ESOL vocabulary words were reported to be helpful by all students, but slightly more so for speaking about art in general than for speaking about their own art. "More vocabulary" was reported to be needed the most in order to become better able to write and speak about art in English; however, vocabulary was also reported to be the most difficult part in learning to speak and write about art in English.

In addition to vocabulary, it was found that free speaking practice about various genres of artwork and individual feedback and comments from the instructor were the most helpful of the classroom activities.

Finally, an analysis of student writing shows that they were able to write more about their art at the end of the course than at the beginning. Moreover, compared to the beginning of the course, their writing at the end of the course contained fewer beginning-level words, i.e. not on the OED list of the 100 most common words (Oxford 2011), not in the glossary of the first-year junior high English textbook (Kasajima et al., 2024), and not words that are the same in both languages. It was also found that 23.8 % of the words appearing in the students' end-of-course writing were course vocabulary words, which would seem to point to the usefulness of the words; however, while students did make some use of the words presented in the course, 43.0 % of the words appearing in their writing were *not* on the course vocabulary list

and were *not* beginning-level words. It can be conjectured that these words were either already known to students or had been looked up for the purpose of the writing task.

In conclusion, the classroom activities conducted in this study appear to have helped students become better able to explain their original art in English, and to have boosted their confidence in their ability to do so. In addition, the course vocabulary words were found to be helpful to some extent, but since each artist's themes, concepts, materials, and so on are unique, the bulk of the words used to explain their art need to be learned on an individual basis.

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Appendix A
Vocabulary Used in the Course, with Translations

able to	出来る	feeling	気持ち	perfect	完璧
abstract	抽象	find	見つける	photograph	写真
actual	実際	folk culture	民族	picture book	絵本
add	加える	form	姿	plants	植物
advertisement	広報	fresh	新た	plot	ストーリー
aim for	目指す	garment	服	positive	肯定
apparel	衣服	generation	世代	processing	加工
appear	現れる	glad	嬉しい	public	公共
artwork	作品	have fun	楽しめる	real	実
assignment	課題	high school	高校	realism	写実
atmosphere	雰囲気	human	人間	realistic	リアル
attraction	魅力	illustration	イラスト	reality	現実
awareness	意識	imagine	想像	reason	理由
begin	始まる	impression	印象	recent	最近
building	建物	include	込める	resemble	似る
central	中心	individual	個人	scene	情景
change	変える	intriguing	好奇	scenery	風景
come out	出る	landscape	景色	senses	感覚
companions	仲間	learn	学ぶ	shadow	影
composed of	構成	legend	伝統	signboard	看板
composition	構図	lesson	授業	sketching	デッサン
connect	繋ぐ	letter/character	字	space	空間
consider	考察	lettering	文字	start	始まる
convey	伝える	life forms	生き物	story	物語
costume	衣装	limited	限定	surface/side	画
create	創造	list	挙げる	surround	取り巻く
curiosity	興味	location	場所	take photos	撮影
deep	深い	machine	機械	testimony	証言
department	領域	main character	主人公	the five senses	五感
depict	描ける	materials	素材	theme	テーマ
difference	違い	meaning	意味	traces	痕跡
dye	染料	merchandise	商品	transient	儚い
effective	有効	modern	現代	transparent	透明
emotion	感情	motif	モチーフ	triangle	三角
encounter	出会う	movement	動き	true	真
energy	エネルギー	myself	自身	universe	宇宙
era	時代	negative	ネガ	university	大学
etc.	その他	nostalgic	懐かしい	utilize	使用
everyday	日常	notice	気づく	variation	変化
evil	悪魔	novel	小説	various	様々
exhibition	展示	object	オブジェ	viewpoint	見方
experience	体験	one part	一部	volume/book	書物
express	表現	ordinary	普段	warm	温かい
fabric	布	paint	絵具	wearing	纏う
familiar	身近	paper	紙	whimsical	気まぐれ
fantasy	幻想	past	過去		

Note: Modified by author from a vocabulary list identified in a previous study (Fukao, 2023).

Appendix B
Vocabulary Added to Supplement the Course Content, with Translations

background	背景、	horizontal	水平	rhyming words	韻を踏む
blurred image	ぼやけた画像	iconic	象徴的な	sales increase	売上増加
bronze	青銅	influence	影響	sculpture	彫刻
carve	彫る	installation art	インスタレーションアート	setting	舞台
competitor	競合他社	interactive art	インタラクティブアート	sewing machine	ミシン
consumer	消費者	kinetic sculpture	動的彫刻	silk	絹
details	詳細	leather	革	speech balloon	吹き出し
dialogue	対話	marble	大理石	still life	静物
distorted image	歪んだ	marketing strategy	マーケティング戦略	stripes	しま模様
empathy	共感	mirror image	鏡像	suspend	つるす
floral design	花模様	onomatopoeia	オノマトペ	transform	変える
focal point	焦点	parody	パロディー	trial and error	試行錯誤
foreground	前景	polka dots	水玉模様	tripod	三脚
four-framed comic	4 コマ漫画	pop-up book	飛び出す絵本	vertical	垂直
fur	毛皮	portrait	肖像画	visual impact	視覚的なインパクト
glossy	光沢のある	pun	だじゃれ	weave on a loom	織機で織る
graphic novel	漫画の小説	reflect	反射する	welding	溶接
guerilla marketing	ゲリラ・マーケティング				