



"Teaching Empathy and Language: Using Europeana to Explore Disability Heritage in the EFL Classroom"

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Abstract

The paper explores the integration of cultural heritage and inclusive education into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction through the use of Europeana, a digital platform that offers access to millions of cultural artifacts from all over Europe. Specifically, it focuses on using materials related to Disability Heritage to boost both language acquisition and the development of empathy among the students. Based on theories of critical literacy, intercultural competence, and inclusive education, the approach aims to humanize language learning by engaging the students with underrepresented narratives.

The study presents a classroom intervention conducted with 14-year-old A2-level learners in a Greek secondary school. Through three 45-minute sessions, the students got engaged with authentic historical content from Europeana and had the chance to develop social skills that a mature citizen of the future should have. The lessons were designed to enhance the four core language skills while also encouraging emotional engagement and critical thinking. The students took on various roles within their groups (e.g., linguist, historian, ICT expert), promoting peer learning and collaborative inquiry.

Observational data and post-activity reflections revealed increased student motivation, vocabulary improvement, intercultural awareness, and empathetic understanding. The learners demonstrated the ability to contextualize disability in both historical and modern settings, using the target language beyond textbook boundaries. The findings suggest that incorporating digital heritage resources like Europeana into the EFL curriculum can serve as a powerful tool for promoting inclusive, meaningful, and socially engaged language education. This approach not only enriches linguistic competence but also supports the formation of globally aware and empathetic learners.

Keywords: Europeana, Digital Heritage, Empathy in EFL classroom

1. Introduction

Europeana is a multilingual online platform that provides access to millions of digitized cultural heritage items from European museums, galleries, libraries, and archives. While initially intended for research and public engagement with European history, Europeana also offers rich potential as a resource in the EFL classroom. Many educators are growing some interest in using its digitized items in their lesson plans. Some of them even submit learning scenarios on various topics and implement new ideas to promote the importance of cultural heritage. The integration of a digital material in EFL has opened new opportunities for learner engagement through authentic materials. Scholars such as Thorne (2009) and Pegrum (2014) argue that learners benefit from exposure to real-world content, particularly when it involves multimodal and historical texts that invite personal and critical reflection. Furthermore, recent work in **critical literacy** and **inclusive pedagogy** (Janks, 2010; Slee, 2011) supports the use of narratives that challenge dominant perspectives and highlight underrepresented voices—including those of individuals with disabilities. Bringing disability heritage into the EFL classroom promotes empathy, equity, diversity while also serving as an effective stimulus for language production.

2. Methodology

2.1 Lesson Context

This lesson was piloted in a Greek public secondary school on the island of Syros with a class of 14-year-old learners (20 students in total), all at the A2 CEFR level. The intervention spanned three 45-minute sessions. Qualitative observations and informal student feedback were collected post-implementation. The teacher documented student engagement, vocabulary acquisition, and peer collaboration to evaluate the effectiveness of the lesson. A questionnaire was administered before and after the tasks to assess the development of empathy in students.

Students worked in groups where stronger and weaker students were assigned different roles (e.g., a secretary, a linguist, a historian, an ICT expert). Peer teaching was encouraged.

2.2 Materials and Tools

For the lesson, materials from the Europeana digital archive were used to help students learn about people with disabilities in Europe in the past and reflect on today's reality. The lessons aimed to improve all four of students' language skills (reading, listening, writing, and speaking) through exploring authentic historical sources. The activities also fostered empathy and intercultural awareness while encouraging meaningful language use. The lesson activities were scaffolded to support different learning styles and included group work, visual analysis, storytelling, and creative tasks. By the end of the lesson, students developed greater confidence in expressing opinions, describing historical figures or events, and reflecting on themes of inclusion and representation.

Implementation requirements included:

- Internet-connected devices (one per pair or group)
- Access to Europeana (<https://www.europeana.eu>)
- Printed dictionaries or lists of online dictionaries
- Pre-existing student familiarity with web tools

The teacher supported students in becoming familiar with the tools and developing their digital skills. The teacher was responsible for creating multiple user accounts and distributing access credentials for the web tools used, ensuring both student safety and the ability to monitor progress at any time through a simple login.

2.3 Procedure

2.3.1 Warm- up stage

Students were shown some images from Europeana (**Figures 1, 2, 3, 4**) and were asked to guess the topic of the lesson. At the same time, some important vocabulary, as shown below, in the table, was provided to help students to describe briefly the images. The teacher coordinated their work and tried to elicit new vocabulary. Each team made a presentation and tried to guess the topic.

wheelchair	blind	deaf	sign language	Braille code	inclusion
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Figure 1



Figure 2

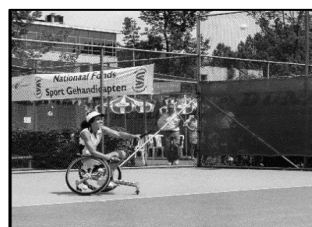


Figure 3



Figure 3

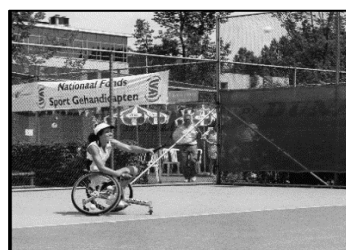


Figure 4



2.3.2 Activity 1 (45 minutes)

Students were given a [link](#) about the Paralympic Games and were asked to answer in groups the following questions. Again here peer teaching was encouraged with stronger students helping weaker students. All teams exchanged their ideas in front of their peers.

Part A

1. What are the Paralympic Games?
2. When did the first official Paralympic Games take place?
3. Where were the first official Paralympic Games held?
4. Who started the idea of sports for people with disabilities after World War II?
5. What was the name of the games Dr. Guttmann organized in 1948?
6. Why did Dr. Guttmann believe sport was important for people with disabilities?
7. Which games were the beginning of the Paralympics we know today?

PART B (Activity 2 can be assigned as homework)

1. How many sports can you name in the [link](#)?

.....

.....

2. Can you name the sports below?



Now check here the names of the Olympic games [here](#).

.....

.....

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2.3.2 Activity 2 (45 minutes)

Students are given this [link](#) about forms of disability in art. They are asked to choose one and imagine they are that person. They need to work individually. **(Figure 5)**

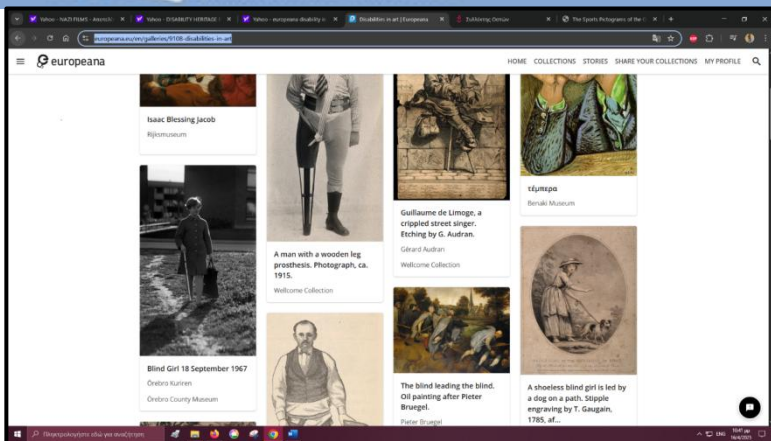


Figure 5

Choose a picture. Imagine you are that person. Write a short diary entry (6–8 sentences). Use the following outline to help you. Write about 80–100 words.

1. My name is _____.
2. I was born in _____.
3. I had a problem with my _____.
4. People looked at me and _____.
5. I felt _____ because _____.
6. In my time, life was _____.
7. I like _____ in my free time.
8. Today, life is _____.

Different types of activities as homework can be given at this stage according to the readiness of each student.

1. Write your story on the Padlet wall. (writing skills)
2. Prepare an oral presentation using Vocaroo (for students with auditory skills or students with a difficulty in writing.)
3. Fill in the sentences given and roleplay it in class. Use music background as well! (for kinesthetic learners)

3. Reflections and pedagogical analysis

This lesson was piloted with a group of 14-year-old EFL learners (A2-level according to CEFR) in a Greek secondary school setting on the island of Syros. The students responded positively to the visual and emotional power of the digital items and used the L2 beyond textbook prompts. They also found out about the inclusion of people with disabilities in the past and connected it to contemporary issues of access and inclusion.

From a language learning perspective, the use of authentic materials from Europeana encouraged both extensive descriptive language and critical vocabulary development. Students practiced vocabulary about disabilities and the Paralympic Games, expanded their vocabulary about emotions and attitudes, and boosted their grammar to present the past and also present habits.

Moreover, this lesson fostered **empathetic engagement**. By asking learners to imagine the lives of individuals with disabilities in historical contexts, the activity helped humanize history and reduce stigma. In doing so, Europeana functioned not only as a content repository but **as a gateway to inclusive education**.

(Table 1)

Educators have a key role in the process; they must curate materials in advance and provide guiding questions.

Table 1: Teacher Observations During Implementation

Parameter Observed	Description of Observation	Indicators / Notes
Student Engagement	Level of attention, motivation, and participation during	Most students stayed on task, actively contributed to

	activities	discussions, and asked questions
Vocabulary Acquisition	Use of target vocabulary related to disability and empathy	Students accurately used new vocabulary like Braille, inclusion, Paralympics
Peer Collaboration	Interaction in groups and support among students with different skill levels	Stronger students helped weaker ones to focus on simple vocabulary and grammar; teams shared tasks effectively
Empathetic Response	Emotional reactions and sensitivity to historical figures with disabilities	Students showed increased empathy in diary entries and discussion They navigated through Europeana and found more important people with disabilities (Geniuses and their abilities)
Use of L2 in Context	Students used the L2 beyond the school textbook	Students described images, shared personal thoughts, and roleplayed in L2
Creativity and Critical Thinking	Student ability to imagine perspectives and respond with original ideas	Some wrote reflective diary entries or designed thoughtful multimedia responses(e.g. podcasts made with VOCAROO)

4. Discussion and further research

While this study focused on qualitative observations and student reflections during the piloted lesson, future research could benefit from a more systematic, quantitative approach. A formal pre- and post-activity questionnaire—like the one included below—could be used to statistically assess shifts in student attitudes toward disability, empathy, and intercultural understanding.

Question	Pre-Activity Response
1. How would you describe people with disabilities?	[Write detailed student response here]
2. How comfortable do you feel talking to someone with a disability?	1 = Very uncomfortable, 2, 3, 4, 5 = Very comfortable (Circle number)
3. Do you think people with disabilities need extra help in everyday life?	1 = Strongly disagree, 2, 3, 4, 5 = Strongly agree (Circle number)
4. How often do you interact with people who have disabilities?	1 = Never, 2, 3, 4, 5 = Very often (Circle number)
5. Do you think people with disabilities are treated equally in your school or community?	1 = Not at all, 2, 3, 4, 5 = Completely (Circle number)
6. What do you think are the biggest challenges for people with disabilities?	Write your response here
7. Are you familiar with the Paralympics?	1 = Not at all, 2, 3, 4, 5 = Very familiar (Circle number)
8. What is your opinion about athletes with disabilities who compete in the Paralympics?	Write your response here
9. What could you do in the future to support people with disabilities in your school or community?	Write your response here



Question	Post-Activity Response
1. How would you describe people with disabilities?	Write your response here
2. How comfortable do you feel talking to someone with a disability?	1 = Very uncomfortable, 2, 3, 4, 5 = Very comfortable (Circle number)
3. Do you think people with disabilities need extra help in everyday life?	1 = Strongly disagree, 2, 3, 4, 5 = Strongly agree (Circle number)
4. How often do you interact with people who have disabilities?	1 = Never, 2, 3, 4, 5 = Very often (Circle number)
5. Do you think people with disabilities are treated equally in your school or community?	1 = Not at all, 2, 3, 4, 5 = Completely (Circle number)
6. What do you think are the biggest challenges for people with disabilities?	Write your response here
7. Are you familiar with the Paralympics?	1 = Not at all, 2, 3, 4, 5 = Very familiar (Circle number)
8. What is your opinion about athletes with disabilities who compete in the Paralympics?	Write your response here
What could you do in the future to support people with disabilities in your school or community?	Write your response here

5. Conclusion

Using Europeana to teach disability heritage in the EFL classroom supports multiple pedagogical goals: language development, digital literacy, intercultural awareness, and empathy. This approach not only motivates learners through authentic, meaningful content but also empowers them to engage with broader social issues through the lens of language learning. As educational practice evolves, incorporating inclusive, critical, and historically grounded materials like those found on Europeana can enrich the EFL curriculum and support the development of socially aware, linguistically capable global citizens

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