The Role of Visual Culture Studies on Primary School Students' Interpretation of Visual World[*]

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Abstract

Visual culture studies have become the focus of research in recent years mainly due to the frequent use of art applications in Visual Arts courses in primary schools and the inadequate content of discipline based art education for the interpretation of today's multiple stimulants. By interrogating students' semantic stratums related to visuals, visual culture studies carried out in Visual Arts courses can help students gain a different perspective regarding artistic studies. The present study aimed finding out how visual culture studies can be carried out in Visual Arts courses in primary schools. The study had an action research design and was conducted during the 10 hours class-time of a Visual Arts course in a third-grade class of a primary school in Eskişehir in the fall semester of 2007-2008 academic year. The data of the present study, which was conducted on seven focal students, were collected with various data collection tools, such as demographic information scale, video recordings, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, researcher diaries and student diaries. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive analysis. The present study revealed that the students effectively participated in visual culture studies; that they made critical interrogations by broadening their thoughts based on their previous knowledge; and that they found the course more entertaining thanks to the visual culture studies. In conclusion, findings of the study suggest that visual art applications, which will encourage students to criticize cultural meanings within the Visual Art Curriculum, may be used as a strong instrument to help students interpret the visual world and become more efficient in expressing their ideas in art works.

Key Words

Primary Education, Art Education, Visual Culture Studies, Action Research.

Since prehistoric times, every era expresses itself via different linguistic arts such as legends, sayings and writings. Today, with the rapid developments in technology such as the invention of the camera followed by animated images like cinema and television, the world is going through an era dominated by "images and visual culture" (Parsa, 2007, p. 1). Visual culture is defined as "making the values and beliefs of a culture apparent in various ways (Barnard, 2002, p. 22). Mitchell (1995, p. 209) considers visual culture as an interdisciplinary approach and as "a cultural and social examination of visual experience". This new culture is a visual synthesis. In this respect, visual culture includes perception of observations and understanding of carrying this perception to a meta-consciousness level (Karadağ, 2004, p. 13). Parallel to the increasing cultural values in today's pluralist world, cumulative images help concretize the conflicting way of seeing, which is historically, socially and culturally typical (Leppert, 2002, p. 14). What is handled in visual culture is not the visual itself but the meaning that the visual conveys for the society and the world.

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Recent studies have revealed that visual culture studies in art education develop students' critical perspectives (Sherman, 2001; Tavin & Hausman, 2004); that focusing more on their own lives and on details, students can establish relationships between subjects and create their own meanings by broadening their horizons (Bezerra, 2006; Sohn, 2004; Tavin, 2003); that visual culture studies help students create their own images (Tavin & Anderson, 2003); that they experience the process of giving meaning to life (Chan, 2005); that visual culture studies are influential on students' becoming socio-cultural ties (Darts, 2004); and that the drawings of students who can reflect their visual culture knowledge are rich in description and composition and have a variety of objects (Türkkan, 2006).

One of the most important tools that visual culture helps individuals gain meanings via education is the course of Visual Arts and art education. In our country, although the Visual Arts Course Curriculum in primary schools especially emphasize today's multiple stimulants and cover different disciplines of art education, studies carried out (Akengin, 2005; Bülbül, 2003; Kahraman, 2007; Yükselgün, 2010) demonstrate that the Primary School Visual Arts Course usually includes art applications. However, the course of Visual Arts, which should also include disciplines such as art history, art criticism and aesthetics besides art applications as it is required by discipline-based art education, are to cover visual culture studies for giving meaning to today's visual world. The reason is that some of the studies conducted revealed that discipline-based art education is traditional in various aspects and is to be developed (Dikovitskaya, 2001) and that the tendency towards transforming traditional art education into visual culture studies is likely to put in order giving meaning to culture via art education in school environments (Efland, 2005, p. 35).

When the multiple stimulants in the environment and the visual communication transporters are included in the content of the course of Visual Arts, students will acquire the ability to correctly interpret all the stimulants they observe and perceive in their environment correctly as well as acquiring creative thinking skills in art. This situation will both increase the quality of art courses and help individuals perceive and interpret selectively. In this way, it will be possible to train individuals as conscious art consumers. In this respect, visual culture studies within the scope of this course are important since such studies allow selectivity for the consumption of the popular culture that has entered in life spaces without any question. In one study carried out by Carter (2004), it was found out that children question the effects of the visual media, popular culture and other cultures with the help of visual culture studies. Consequently, as mentioned by Mirzoeff (1998, p. 3), in today's world featuring visual stimulants, for people, seeing has become more effective than believing. The rich visual experiences in the modern world culture make it necessary to study visual culture as a field.

In visual culture studies, which will be carried out in the course of Visual Arts, telling students that all objects and all the things they see around have meanings and have cultural stories will help these students to recognize that visuals include a number of meanings. Students questioning the semantic stratums of the visuals together with the thoughts of their friends, develop their own critical thinking skills as well. In addition, in the course of Visual Arts including visual culture studies, primary school children, who most intensively perceive and observe the outside world, could be thought to reflect their own perceptions and observations regarding their environment into their own art works via the images and meanings they themselves have created. In this respect, in the course of Visual Arts, questioning the meanings of the rich stimulants provided by the visual culture studies and determining the rich art works reflecting the visual cultural elements have proved the need for this research.

Purpose

The aim of this study was to find out how the visual culture studies can be carried out in Visual Arts courses in primary schools. In line with this basic purpose, the following research questions were asked:

1. In the application process of the Visual Arts courses conducted based on visual culture studies,

- How are the students encouraged to participate into the visual culture studies?

- Do the students examine the visual culture tools -which they followed in the context of visual culture studies- with a critical perspective?

- Do the students present their perspectives via their previous knowledge and experiences?

2. Do the students transform the images they have obtained via visual culture studies into an artistic product?

3. What are the views of the students about the Visual Arts courses in which visual culture studies are conducted?

Method

Since the present study was based on the educational applications of cultural studies in the Visual Arts courses, the study had an action research design. Action research could be described as "a process of research conducted in real settings such as schools or classes to increase and understand the quality of actions and education" (Hensen, 1996, p. 54). Johnson (2005, p. 13) regards action research - one of the most powerful research designs (Ekiz, 2003, p. 55) - as a way of questioning which is pre-planned, organized and shared with others in creating the changes and developments in settings like schools and classrooms.

Action Research Process

The study was conducted in the scope of action research phases (Mills, 2003). First of all, the focal area was determined. In this respect, visual culture studies which occur as a new way of education that help the students understand the visual codes of this era and that require partly decreasing the traditional ties between the Visual Arts course and drawing and painting were chosen as a field to focus on. Within the context of the field to be focused on, the lessons taught by the teacher in the classrooms where the study would be conducted were observed for three weeks. In addition, the focused students were determined, and the possible actions were planned. Following this, the application process started, and the data were collected and analyzed. As a result of the analysis and interpretation of the data, the action plans were developed and were made ready for application in line with the expert suggestions. In the study, the whole application process was video-taped, and at the end of the activities, semi-structured interviews were held with the students. The study was designed on an animation movie, one of the visual communication tools. In the study, the instructional activities applied were carried out based on the constructivist learning theory. The students determined the subjects to be applied after discussing the points -they were interested in- in the animation, 'Happy Feet' they watched. The students decided on three activities; 'Gender Roles', 'I Draw the Song in Me', and 'Environmental Life Exhibition'. This study employed only the activity of 'I Draw the Song in Me'.

The application process of the activity of "I am drawing the song inside me" was carried out in the form of creative music activity which was planned as a group work and a story activity planned as an individual work followed by a drawing activity. In the phase of the creative music activity related with the requirement for each penguin in the cartoon film to discover the inside song, the students were grouped. Each group was asked to find its own melody. By combining the groups, the song of the class was created. During the creation of the melodies, the students tore the distributed newspaper pages into pieces and threw them on the ground in accordance with the rhythm. After the song of the class was created, the groups made a pictorial description of it by using the paper piles on the ground. In the second phase, a story activity was carried out by combining the objects made up of pictorial descriptions. In the last phase, the students drew their pictures depending on the stories.

In the study, the application process of the action research was executed by the researcher. At the end of the application, the researcher filed all the data – collected via various data collection tools – in a data set. This data set included video recordings, macro and micro analyses of these videos recordings of the activities carried out each week, researcher diaries, personal information forms, stories written by students and also students' art products.

Participants

The study was conducted in a primary school in Eskişehir in the fall semester of 2007-2008. The educational aspect of the study was made up of 30 students in a third-grade class, yet a total of seven students were chosen for the focus of the study. While choosing the focal students, 'internal sampling' was used. In internal sampling, the researcher determines the time, the individuals, the documents and key information in the environment. In this way, not all the individuals are included in the study process (McMillan, 2004, pp. 272-273). In the study, criterion sampling method was used for internal sampling. In criterion sampling, a series of criteria prepared earlier can be used, or the criteria can be developed by the researcher (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005, p. 87). The students' interest in artistic studies and the students' self-expression skills were the criteria used for internal sampling.

Data Collection

The visual culture studies were conducted in 10 class-hours in the Visual Arts course. The research data were collected with different data collection tools such as the demographic information scale, video recordings, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, researcher diaries and student diaries. Among these, the demographic information scale was prepared to gather personal information about the students and about their families. The reason is that as it is also mentioned by Bourdieu (2006, pp. 226-227), children in cultured families borrow their parents' interest while visiting museums and exhibitions together with their parents. The educational activities carried out were videotaped in order to help the researcher follow the in-class applications objectively and to allow the validity committee members to express their views about the process clearly. In the study, semi-structured interviews were held with the seven focal students at the end of the activity. The interviews were held regarding the class applications and the art works of the students. The artistic studies the students conducted in the scope of the Visual Arts course were analyzed via document examination. The researcher diaries and the student diaries, other data collection tools, were used to make evaluations regarding the application process.

For the validity studies, a validity committee of four experts was established. The committee was made up of field experts and experts in the field of qualitative research. While watching the video recordings of the classroom applications, the committee members marked their observations -regarding the teaching process, the students' skills and the instructional roles of the researcher - in a video-check list developed based on the experts' views. In addition, the committee members also put forward their suggestions and thoughts about the applications.

Data Analysis

For the analysis and interpretation of the research data, descriptive analysis was applied. The data collected during the educational activities were regularly analyzed, and the results of the analysis were presented to the views of the validity committee on a weekly basis. The relationships among all the collected data and their consistency were examined at the end of the educational activities. In the study, first, the data collected via the semi-structured interviews were transcribed into interview forms.

In addition, at the end of the course, the video-recordings were also transcribed, and the related macro analyses were carried out. At the end of the application, with the help of the transcriptions of all the process of video-recordings, micro analyses were conducted. The data obtained via micro analyses were analyzed together with the other research data. The video-recordings and the transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews and the audio-recordings of these interviews were given to an expert in their original forms, and the agreements and disagreements were calculated. For the calculation of the reliability of the codings carried out by the researcher and the expert, the formula of (Reliability = agreement / agreement + disagreement x 100) suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) was used. The reliability of the study was found as 86%. Following this, the findings were described and interpreted, and the themes and sub-themes were determined along with the experts. The art works of the students were examined together with a field expert, and the reflections of the visual culture studies onto the artistic products were determined by mutual consent.

Results

- The students were encouraged to participate in the visual culture studies which are included in primary school Visual Arts course and were obtained with the help of the questions the researcher asked and of the subject-related visual samples the researcher presented.

- In the visual culture studies, students actively participated in the activities and discussions in the classroom environment. During the activities that the students had chosen on their own, they participated in the discussions related to the topic and took part in the art work voluntarily. The students in the study diversified their thoughts, which they uttered about the animation with examples from their own lives, and then they questioned the subject critically. The students, while revealing their thoughts and feelings about the topic, used their previous knowledge and experience.

- It was seen that the visual culture studies conducted in the Visual Arts course reflected on the artistic products of the students. During the creative music activity, the students were asked to tear and throw the distributed newspaper pages on the ground in accordance with the melody created. The students made pictorial

descriptions using the pile of the torn newspaper pages on the ground. The object of 'bag' was added by the researcher to the objects created. The students wrote a story in a way to cover all these objects. In addition, while reading the stories, the researcher started a questioning process only for the object of 'bag' and asked the students to draw a picture with the help of the stories they wrote or listened to. It was seen that the students partly reflected the other objects in their drawings, while the object of 'bag' -which was discussed in terms of its production and consumption- was depicted by all the students.

- The students found that the course with visual culture studies was different from the previous course format they were engaged in. While talking about this difference, the focal students talked about the experience of drawing with a topic and for a purpose in comparison to drawing without a topic. Moreover, the students stated that the visual culture studies were different from the traditional Visual Arts courses in terms of group work, research, skills related to the course, and communication.

- The students found the Visual Arts course with the visual culture studies more pleasant. They believed the visual culture studies, besides being more enjoyable, to be an educative and informative process and a pre-planned course. Moreover, the students also pointed out that the visual culture studies helped them to visualize their dreams.

Discussion

In this study, which aimed at determining how visual culture studies could be conducted in the Visual Arts courses in primary schools, the application process of the activity carried out was made up of in-class discussions, application of the activity and the products created via artistic studies. All the activities applied in the study were prepared based on an animation film the students watched. In the study, the students were observed to participate actively in the lessons and the application. The subjects included in the Visual Arts course content were determined by the students depending on an animation film which is one of the visual culture tools that helped the students focus on the subjects and establish relationships between the subjects. The reason was that during the application carried out, which is based on the constructivist learning

theory, the students were observed to play an important role in the creation of the subjects. In the process of determining the activities, the students reported their views and talked in excitement about the animation they watched joyfully. This finding of the study supports the finding of another study carried out by Yurdakul (2004) who reported that students have richer learning experiences when they take part in their own learning process in the constructivist approach. In the study, in order to encourage students to participate in the visual culture studies, challenging questions were directed to the students and subject-related visual samples were presented. Mitchell (2002) stated that the examples shown to the students regarding the rich stimulants enrich their way of thinking. It was seen that these visual stimulants created an elaboration in students' discussions and in their way of handling the subjects and that the visual stimulants helped them question the link between what is apparent and what is real. This finding of the study is consistent with the finding of another study conducted by Chan (2005), who reported that when students carry out visual culture studies in their artistic education, they gain an interrogative perspective, and these interrogations increase in time. In the present study, it was revealed that the students reflected a critical perspective on the subjects with the help of the visual culture studies and that they supported their thoughts by means of their previous knowledge and experiences. The students first described the situation regarding the subject in the animation and then made critical interrogations by associating the subject with their daily lives. This finding of the present study is similar to the finding of another study conducted by Tavin (2003), who stated that when artistic education focuses on the criticism, interpretation and analysis of the visual culture, students can create their own images, make associations between subjects and their own lives, and focus more on details.

As mentioned by Duncum (2003), it is necessary to focus not only on students' critical thinking and questioning but also on how this questioning is reflected in their products in visual culture studies. In the study, during the creative music activity, the students wrote a story including the objects they were provided with through visual culture studies. In their stories, most of the students created a fiction that included all the objects. This finding of the study is parallel to the finding of a study carried out by Tavin and Anderson (2003), who asked the students in their study to write a story

and prepare a poster through visual culture studies and consequently reported that while most of the students' products were visually attractive, the products were richer and had emotional meanings in content. As for the drawings of the students, it was seen that other objects were partly reflected in the drawings and that the object of 'bag', about which discussions were made in the context of production and consumption, was reflected in all the student drawings. In the study, the majority of the students used all the objects in their stories. However, the fact that the students used only the questioned object in their drawings is consistent with the finding of a study conducted by Belet and Türkkan (2007) who reported that primary school students can express their perceptions and observations in their written statements, while they can present more abstract and in-depth thoughts in their pictorial depictions.

The results of the present study also demonstrated that the students found the Visual Arts course more entertaining thanks to the visual culture studies and that they considered the course content as different from that of the previous course. The students, who reported that the difference occurred mostly because the course was taught through certain subjects, stated that with the help of the discussions, they were able to think about what they could do in the activity to be carried out. This finding of the study is consistent with Darts's (2004) finding that there is a strong relationship between visual culture and art, and artistic studies have become more understandable thanks to the use of visual culture. To conclude, the fact that the students determined the subjects - included in the content of the Visual Arts course - with the help of a cartoon film, one of visual culture tools, helped the students focus on the subject, make associations among the subjects depending on the cartoon film, and make systematic interrogations regarding the subject. Therefore, for the application of the content required by the curriculum of the Visual Arts course, it is important to make a starting point based on visual culture tools and to inform primary school teachers - who teach this course - about the contributions of visual culture studies to students. In addition, studies based on different tools of visual culture such as photographic work, movies or advertisements and studies based on the similarities and differences among the cultures of different countries can be conducted.

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