

Arabic art and language learning project report (Peace School, 2018)

(Fatima Khaled, class teacher and headteacher at Peace School)

School: The Peace School, a complementary school in the London Borough of Brent

Lead teacher: Fatima Khaled

Class background: 12 students, mixed, 8 Arabic background, 4 non-Arabic background, age range of 11-17

Unit title: Language in art and the work of Ali Omar Ermes: 'La', 'Kalla', 'Wa Lan' ('No', 'Never', 'Nevermore')

(Based on resource 'Language in art and the work of Ali Omar Ermes', pp.87-97)

Timescale: 13 lessons of 80 mins (5 lessons devoted to creating digital story based on theme of art works)

Aims - see resource (p.88)

Interest in using the cross-curricular art and language resource

Having used and seen the benefits of a cross-curricular approach previously, I was very eager to start a project related to art and Arabic. I was especially interested in the focus on Ali Omar Ermes as a modern Arab artist who uses language in art with a strong cultural/literary dimension. I could see the relevance of the work for students learning Arabic and the connections they can make. I was also aware that little if any attention is paid to Middle Eastern art in mainstream schools.

The cross-curricular approach is a lot different to the usual teaching of Arabic language where the main emphasis is on the language learning aspect. Here there is a focus both on the visual art subject content and the language learning.

Art is a means of allowing students to truly expand and challenge their creativity, imagination and capability. Knowing there is no wrong answer when analyzing art, automatically relieves students of stress and instead allows them the freedom to voice their thoughts and ideas.

Stages in delivering the unit

I followed the three-stage pedagogical model upon which the resource is based: Approaching - Exploring - Creating.

In the Approaching stage, I showed the eight selected works of Ali Omar Ermes and allowed students to see what exactly catches their attention. I then focused on La Kalla, Wa Lan, and asked the students to develop their ideas on these works taking into account mood, process, content, and form. In the process I drew attention to key words in Arabic for talking about art and asked students to develop personal glossaries.

In terms of Exploring, I asked students to complete various activities from the resource. I focused particularly on enabling students to access the poetry and this included learning to read between the lines. This involved familiarising students with some new vocabulary related to politics and justice.

After exploring the work, the students began to associate their work with their day to day lives and personal affairs, which led into the Creating stage of film-making. Students worked collaboratively to construct storylines, create storyboards and film scripts and then to rehearse, film and edit their work. This is their [final film](#). A further creative response was the writing of 'nathr' (lyrical prose pieces) in the style used by Ermes in his art works, a sample of which can be found [here](#).

Main achievements

Overall this project was a great and refreshing experience for students of all backgrounds and levels as it gave them the ability to analyze the art works, including the poetry, and to express opinions. Thus they

developed their knowledge and appreciation of art including the thought and effort that goes into the making of each painting. Students showed a high level of concentration in carrying out this work and found they could make personal connections to their own life experience. It was brilliant to see how students took ownership of their learning and felt empowered to express themselves creatively on issues that matter to them. I also witnessed how the work instilled a sense of pride in Arab culture and heritage.

However, the greatest achievement was their creativity, team effort and most importantly their enthusiasm and positive attitude towards the lessons which led them to constantly keep in touch with each other outside school hours. The digital story created by the class is made up of four sections: two are related to bullying, where dramatized scenes are framed by powerful statements making links to the art works. In the third section students, speaking directly to camera, protest against different forms of injustice in the world. The fourth contains a general reflection on Hermes' art work and its influence on their own creative output.

Issues

Students didn't know what to make of the art works at first and were hesitant to use their imagination and express their thoughts freely. Gradually though this changed as they started to look closely at the work and to generate ideas and interpretations collaboratively. Moving out of their comfort zones, they became more confident and began to challenge themselves and me with them. The deep engagement with the art works gave them the foundation and inspiration they needed to create their bilingual Arabic English digital stories.

Future plans

I shall continue to use the resource with my class focusing on different sections. And will continue to devote about a third of class time to this cross-curricular work as I have found this gives a good balance. The art focus provides an authentic context for students to improve a range of skills and for the development of critical and creative thinking.

Some comments from students about the unit

- *... it's really, really interesting. I've never done a project like this and we learnt so many things going step to step.*
- *Everyone had different interpretations of the paintings because we have different views so we can hear their opinions and also understand them and compare it to others*
- *Art and language have so many things in common. They both work together ...*
- *.... now in my writing I can use words that I didn't know.*
- *We're all more capable in talking about a topic.*
- *... a lot of critical thinking has to be used.*
- *You don't often see text in art. It's really nice. It's something new.*
- *It showed us how colours have emotions ...*
- *the visual factor of it gives the feeling to the text, to the words.*
- *helps you develop your own creativity.*

