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Textart, identity and the creative process: a case study with Arabic heritage language learners

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ABSTRACT

Informed by a postmodern perspective on language, culture and visual art education this article examines what a creative, visual art focus can bring to the experience of language-and-culture learning for secondary-age students of Arabic as a heritage language (HL). It builds on our previous research focussing on student interactions with works by renowned artist, Ali Omar Ermes, which sets text in the form of Arabic letter shapes and short poetic inscriptions against a painted background. Here we seek to gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the process involved through an in-depth study of the thoughts, feelings and emotions experienced by three intermediate-level students as they engage with works by Ermes and then creatively transform them into 'textart' pieces of their own. Methodologically we adopt an ethnographic case study design focussing strongly on process but also incorporating principles of arts-based research. Our findings demonstrate how the approach can extend possibilities for meaning-making and affirmation of identity by connecting with personal experience, by leveraging multiple semiotic resources rhizomically and intertextually, and by making space for affective, spiritual, aesthetic and multisensory dimensions. For heritage language learners this brings a deeper engagement with learning and a strong sense of empowerment as multicompetent speakers.

Introduction

Various studies have demonstrated the value of cross-curricular language and visual artwork in the context of intercultural/transcultural language learning (Parra and Di Fabio 2016; Matos and Melo-Pfeifer 2020; Fleming 2021). They illuminate the importance of an aesthetically oriented pedagogy in which due attention is given to sensory perception and affect, showing how this can free the imagination, enable deeper exploration of intercultural spaces, develop social and political awareness and stimulate higher order thinking. In this article we build on previous research we have conducted to investigate student interactions with works by renowned artist, Ali Omar Ermes, at the Peace School, a Muslim faith, community-based complementary school in North London where Arabic is taught across primary and secondary age ranges (Abdelhadi et al. 2020; Anderson 2022). Our findings showed how introducing visual art into Arabic language learning within a flexible student-centred pedagogical framework can significantly enhance engagement with language and culture by allowing due attention to be paid to personal, affective, aesthetic and multisensory experience. Here we seek to gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the creative process involved through a micro study of work by three Arabic heritage language students. This builds from their responses to textart works of Ermes to the development of their own creative pieces.

Following an ethnographic case study research design we incorporate an arts-based research (ABR) perspective which 'questions scientific and positivist views of knowledge creation, foregrounding the situated and aesthetic, and pointing to feeling-orientated ways of knowing and understanding' (Pool 2018, 15). This is explained further in the Research Method section below. Whilst exploratory in nature the study addresses the following key questions:

1. In what ways can personal interactions with (text)art works provide a stimulating context for heritage language-and-culture learning?
2. What is the process that students go through as they move from responding to textart works to creating pieces of their own?
3. What is the value of translation and poetry writing activities within this approach?
4. How do aesthetic considerations affect the creative process and the intertextual relationships involved?
5. Can active engagement with visual artworks open up a space for personal development, negotiation of identity and finding a voice?
6. What contribution can this approach make to reshaping pedagogies for language learning in particular for heritage learners?

Following this introductory section, we move to consider theoretical perspectives, research methods and background to student artworks. This leads us into the examination of findings and a final section with reflections on the significance of the study for heritage language learning.

Theoretical perspectives

Framing the way we have come to understand language, culture and visual art is a postmodern appreciation of multiple and shifting perspectives, of alternative discourses and social justice, of agency and identity negotiation (Kramsch 2021). Postmodernism challenges monolithic, essentialised and static views of language and culture and the nationalistic ideologies on which they are based, recognising relationships and the significance of subjectivities and lived experience (Spracherleben) in the process of meaning-making (Freedman 2003; Busch 2014; Kramsch 2021).

The work of Claire Kramsch in particular explicates how texts of all varieties (linguistic, visual, audio, etc.), as well as carrying referential or surface meaning, have embedded within them a deeper layer of subjective, symbolic and embodied significance. It is this symbolic layer that the arts, from poetry to painting, tap into, opening up possibilities for personal and imaginative journeying, playful experimentation, and creative expression (Eisner 2002; Duncam 2020; Fleming 2021). It is why they are important not only as subject disciplines in themselves but also as a means of holistic, process-oriented interdisciplinary learning, in other words learning through art or what is sometimes referred to as integrated arts (Hickman and Eglinton 2017). Pedagogically, they allow language learning to be seen 'not as a purely abstract, cognitive, cerebral process' but as one that is 'embedded in action, emotion and aesthetic sensibility' (Fleming 2021, 9).

The arts remind us also that verbal language is part of a much broader semiotic system and that communication can be strengthened and enriched by drawing rhizomically on multiple resources available and by recognising syncretic processes of languaging (Phipps 2007) and transsemiotisation (Lin 2019; Hawkins 2018). This means recognising the affordances of individual modes but also of intertextual relationships and the communicative possibilities and constraints that this entails (Jaworski 2014; Li and Ho 2018). Important here is the shift from an idea of pre-existing semiotic systems to one of 'ensembles and spatial repertoires' (Canagarajah 2011). This has particular relevance in the context of the present study and the 'textart' of Ali Omar Ermes where letter shapes, poetry and painting are all part of an assemblage or bricolage of diverse elements.

Pedagogically, this chimes with Cummins' notion of 'identity texts' drawing on students' intercultural life experience, including their full semiotic repertoires, and the construction of multiple and

fluid identity positions. Taking various forms, ' … written, spoken, signed, visual, musical, dramatic, or combinations in multimodal form' this creative work demands maximum cognitive engagement and maximum identity investment and 'holds a mirror up to students in which their identities are reflected back in a positive light' (Cummins and Early 2011, 3).

The developments outlined above have led to a significant shift in language and culture pedagogy away from a narrow rationalist conceptualisation to one which places much greater emphasis on affective, experiential, sensory and aesthetic perspectives within a fluid and dynamic 'translanguaging space' (Li and Ho 2018). This can be empowering for heritage language learners since it can lead to a richer learning experience, deeper engagement with language and culture and positive affirmation of identity (Norton 2013).

Research method

Seeking to provide an in-depth, holistic study of student engagement with visual art in the Arabic language classroom, it was decided to adopt an ethnographic case study design, but to incorporate principles of arts-based research (ABR) within this.

The case study focuses on a specific instance within a bounded system, in this case the visual art-related work of three intermediate-level Arabic heritage language students. How a case study is conceived reflects underlying values and principles (Harrison et al. 2017). Consistent with a postmodern perspective, the present study is constructivist and interpretivist in orientation with an emphasis on authenticity and discovering meaning and understanding of experiences in context (Stake 1995).

Throughout the project, Fatima Khaled maintained a strong collaborative and dialogic ethos in negotiating the learning process with the class as well as in gaining the support of parents. This was important in encouraging student agency and creativity but also in supporting ongoing reflection. The opportunity to discuss developments with an external researcher familiar with the project (Jim Anderson) was also helpful in developing and refining evolving understandings and in gathering rich data with which to illuminate the case.

In general terms arts-based research can be defined as a transdisciplinary approach which 'adopts tenets of the creative arts in order to address research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined' (Leavy 2020, 4). Table 1 contrasts quantitative, qualitative, and ABR approaches (Leavy 2020, 306).

Arts-based research praxis involves allowing artworks to speak for themselves recognising that they bring aesthetic, sensory and spiritual perspectives, tapping into unconscious and instinctive processes frequently missed in formal academic writing.

Applicable across disciplines, arts-based research is seen to relate to different phases of research including data generation, analysis, interpretation, and representation. Consistent with post-modern concerns it brings to the surface issues of identity and construction of the self within particular environments, uncovering hidden perspectives and giving a voice to the disenfranchised. Rather than seeking to arrive at clear-cut propositional claims, what characterises arts-based research is

Table 1. Tenets of quantitative, qualitative and arts-based research methods.

Quantitative	Qualitative	Arts-based
Numbers	Words	Stories, images, scenes, sensory
Data discovery	Data collection	Data or content generation
Measurement	Meaning	Evocation
Tabulating	Writing	Re(presenting)
Value neutral	Value laden	Political, consciousness-raising, emancipation
Reliability	Process	Authenticity
Validity	Interpretation	Truthfulness
Prove/convince	Persuade	Compel, move, aesthetic power
Generalizability	Transferability	Resonance
Disciplinary	Interdisciplinary	Transdisciplinary

that it 'addresses complex and often subtle interactions' and that it 'provides an image of those interactions in ways that make them noticeable' (Barone and Eisner 2012, 3).

It should be borne in mind that paintings or other created work are often complemented by 'critical-reflexive writing and documentation that sits in proximity to the practice' and this usually takes the form of a portfolio 'including, but not limited to, the artwork(s), associated documentation and a complementary set of writings that articulate and give context to different aspects of the research' (Pool 2018, 34). In the present study, we follow this portfolio approach, foregrounding artworks created by students as well as works by Ermes from which they drew their inspiration. This is supported by data from commentaries, interpretations and translations of poetry by the students themselves as well as ongoing field notes and reflections by Fatima. Other qualitative data was collected including interviews conducted by Fatima with groups of students which sought to elicit student perceptions and feelings of the process they were engaged in.

Data were analysed thematically with the intention of uncovering patterned meanings (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Within this iterative, reflexive process there was a shifting back and forth between data and interpretation and the use of progressive focussing to arrive at deeper and more nuanced understandings. There was careful mapping of students' creative process and of their personal investment as well as their ongoing reflections on their work. Consideration of arts-based research methodology (Leavy 2020) led us to close observation of the artworks themselves and to considering their status as data and their impact emotionally, culturally and aesthetically. By comparing and contrasting the rich data collected and by taking account both of participant perspectives and of the artworks themselves in the context of relevant literature a range of insights were arrived at.

Background to student artworks

Over a period of two years (September 2019–June 2021) class teacher Fatima Khaled, co-author of this article, taught an intermediate-level group of 12 students with varying levels of proficiency in Arabic across the four skills. Aged 12–16, 8 were of Arabic background and 4 of non-Arabic background and they were from various countries of origin. During this time one 90 min teaching session each Saturday was devoted to cross-curricular project-based Arabic language and visual artwork focussing on a number of paintings by Ermes. However due to the pandemic, for a large part of the time classes were held virtually using Microsoft Teams.

Pedagogically Fatima was keen to promote an interactive, personal and critical engagement with the artworks. She wanted her students to move beyond identifying and describing salient formal qualities of the paintings to considering what they could mean in terms of their lived experience. The emphasis, in other words, was on personal response, dialogue and collaboration, providing a safe space for playful experimentation and for students' own agency to come to the fore. Planning was based on dual visual art and Arabic language objectives and a three-stage process of Approaching-Exploring-Creating. A detailed description of this framework is provided in Anderson (2022).

We now move on explore the response of three Arabic background learners to works by Ali Omar Ermes and how this acted as a stimulus for 'textart' pieces of their own within the Creating phase. The three students are: Yusra Budraa, aged 13, of Algerian background; Sobhia Anfal Boularas, also of Algerian background, aged 16; Sirin Nasser Hussein, of Palestinian background, aged 16. All three are intermediate-level heritage language learners at the Peace School and they were selected because of the detailed nature of their work and the depth of thought reflected in their commentaries. This meant that their work fitted well with the focus on the creative process in this research.

Findings

Yusra Budraa

The painting that Yusra's group chose to work on was 'Ba Ayoon El-Akhbaar' by Ali Omar Ermes (Figure 1).

Figure 1. 'Ba Ayoon El-Akhbaar' (1992) by Ali Omar Ermes. https://wwww.aliomarermes.co.uk

The focal point at the centre of this striking painting is an elegantly depicted Arabic letter, Ba, equivalent to the English letter B. It is set against a mottled background made up of lighter and darker elements perhaps suggesting a turbulent sky. The impact of the painted letter lies less in what it conveys as a linguistic sign and more in its symbolic significance as something precious, even sacred, 'the earth at its best' as Yusra put it in her commentary. Fatima mentioned in her field notes how students including Yusra were drawn to particular works initially on an emotional and spiritual level and how this led to personal associations which gave the works greater relevance in the eyes of the students. The painting also contains short poetic inscriptions in very small writing by the famous tenth-century Syrian writer, Abi Hemam al-Merri. Students were asked initially to attempt a draft translation of the poem for homework using dictionaries before coming together to compare their work and then present a final version to Fatima.

Blame yourself that sinned	لك الخير، لم نفساً عليك ذنوبهـا
Don't blame others,	ودع لوم نفس ما عـليك تـليم
Don't hold anyone to account for their sins,	و لا تحاسبْ أي شخص عـلى ذنوبه
How can you see the dust in the eyes of your friend,	وكيف ترى في عين صاحبك القذى
Whilst hiding the branch in yours?	ويخفـى قذى عـينك وهو عـظـيم

Students noticed the emphasis on moral improvement reflected in the saying by the prophet Mohamed (Peace be upon him), specifically that before blaming others for misfortunes in life we should question our own actions. Yusra comments that, when she started to look closely at the painting, she made an immediate association with threats to the planet and human responsibility for this. To extend her thinking she began to draft a story about a girl who dreamt of a beautiful and peaceful world, but came to realise how humanity was destroying this vision and that action was needed to bring about change.

At the same time Yusra began to develop ideas for a textart piece and this unfolded through several draft stages. In an early version (Figure 2), entitled Baa Ayoon El Akhbar as in the work by Ermes, we see how she uses the visual metaphor of hands cradling the planet to convey the idea
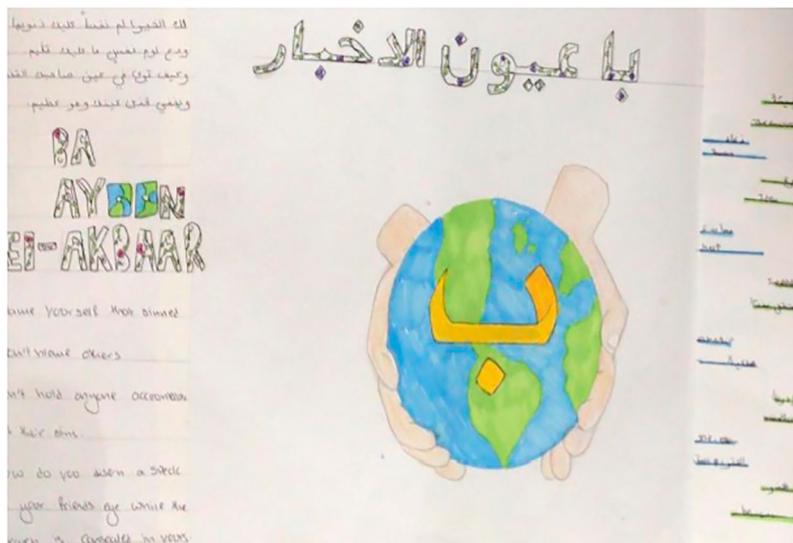
Figure 2. Draft poster by Yusra Budraa.

of human responsibility and superimposes a large letter Ba over the planet. To the left, she has copied the poem by Abi Hemam al-Merri in Ermes' work with a translation below. To the right, she has noted key vocabulary contained in the poem fulfilling Fatima's intention that work should further both artistic and linguistic aims.

Ideas are finally combined into a powerful transmodal, multilayered design integrating painting and poetry in a way which captures sensory, emotional and spiritual relationships and sends a powerful activist message (Figure 3).

As in the original work by Ermes, Yusra's artwork comprises painting and poetry. However, unlike Ermes' work, which remains at a very abstract level, Yusra links hers specifically to threats to the environment. At the centre of work is a hand reaching out towards a broken planet above it, which appears to be cradled in a bowl outlined in gold. Both in colour and in shape this echoes the letter Ba in the top left-hand side of the picture, a point emphasised by the diamond-shaped 'kasra' diacritic marking below it. As Yusra explains in her commentary, for her, the hand is intended to represent 'humankind as one' and the gesture of reaching out to the earth is symbolic of the fact that the planet is 'in our hands'. Moreover, the small gap between the hand and the earth represents 'the time we have left and how rapidly the earth is dying'. In the background are streams of pastel colours flowing into each other, the blue representing the ocean, the green vegetation and the purple destruction. The high proportion of purple is intended to show that 'the world is imbalanced and the bad is overpowering the good'.

Yusra writes the text of her poem in the Arabic style of a 'nathr' or lyrical prose piece in black against this background to the left- and right-hand sides of the painting. For the purpose of making the text accessible to non-Arabic speakers who might be interested in her work Yusra, Anfal and Siren all provided translations of their nathrs. This as well as the translations of poetry in Ermes' works, which they worked on collaboratively, was something that the three participants in this case study all found challenging but ultimately illuminating in terms of the way in which each language, and poetry in particular, inscribes meanings differently and conjurs up distinct moods, feelings and (cultural) associations. The Arabic version was written in Modern Standard Arabic and in responding to drafts Fatima pushed the students to use language in more sophisticated ways including use of more refined and more culturally resonant vocabulary.

Figure 3. (2021) كوكبنا بين يديك (Our planet in your hands) by Yusra Budraa.

Having gone for a literal, word-by-word approach initially they all moved towards a freer interpretation. In spite of this Yusra noted in her commentary how the Arabic version (which she wrote first) flowed more naturally and conveyed deeper emotional and cultural meanings. Responding to a comment by Anfal about the distinctiveness of Arabic and its expressive power, Yusra (Group interview) added that 'it's so different and beautiful that you just can't give it the same effect [in English]'.

You say what you don't do	أتقولون ما لا تفعلون
You claim that you love me	تدعون انكم تحبوني
So why the killing,	فلماذا القتل والتشريد
for those inhebit me	لمن يقطنني
Why war?	لماذا الحروب
Why animal extinction?	لماذا انقراض الحيوانات
Do you say what you do not do…	أتقولون ما لا تفعلون
You laugh and you play	تضحكون تلعبون
And you use my bounty	تستخدمون خيراتي
Whilst pain and sadness fill me	و الألم و الحزن يملؤني
Shame on you for what you did is unforgivable	عار عليكم ما فعلتم عظيم
And you all say you, you ,you,	و الكل يقول انتم أنتم
And yet none of you realise	و لا أحد يبالي
Why do you say what you do not do	لما تقولون ما لا تفعلون

The Arabic writing in the nathr is impassioned and direct. It complements and reinforces the overall message of the painting. There is a sense of anger and betrayal, given added authority through quotations from the holy Quran (saying what you do not do) and to well-known Arab proverb, عار عليك مافعلت عظيم (Shame on you for what you did is unforgivable). Comments made by students in group interviews strongly reflect the way they chose to reflect their faith in their own poetry (Interview 17.00) This brought both a sense of empowerment and pride in an Arab Muslim identity 'such that you can make an impact and like a change'. Across the work of the three students, religious connections in fact proved to be highly significant both as a thread reflecting their own beliefs and family traditions and as a resource drawn on in their creative expression.

With regard to the value of poetry Yusra was clear that it not only 'helps in learning Arabic' but also 'helps your creativity' (Yusra, group interview). You have it 'all in your head' but it 'kind of unlocks that door'. It brings the personal to the fore and 'helps you relay how you feel'. Compared with the artificiality of typical classroom discourse, where learners are expected to be passive recipients of knowledge, this propels you into the real world where you are able to 'act as if you're actually talking' where you are an active participant in the generation of knowledge with the 'right to speak' (Darvin and Norton 2015). As a result, Yusra has gained the confidence to express herself more in Arabic both inside and outside the classroom, a point recognised by Fatima as well as herself. Moreover, instead of feeling embarrassed and even trying to hide the fact that she spoke Arabic 'now honestly I find it so easy … to go outside and like speak Arabee, I find it so easy to be like an Arab and I don't mind being judged because I know that's me' (Yusra, group interview).

Proud to be seen as a British Arab, Yusra finds it 'really sad … that people hide or cower away from their true identity like Arabee.' She has learnt that her voice is important and that poetry and painting can work together to communicate a powerful message about the earth in crisis and the need to take action, a point endorsed by her peers (Field notes, 10 June 2021).

Sobhia Anfal Boularas

In the same group as Yusra, Anfal also worked on Ermes' 'Ba Ayoon El-Akhbaar' and made a similar link to the state of the planet. She was immediately struck by the use of colour in the work and shared ideas gained in a GCSE art course she was taking in her mainstream school at the time of the project to discuss within her group the feelings or moods that different colours may evoke. This was found to offer a useful stimulus for probing into meanings in the painting. Fatima noted (Field notes, 23 January 2021) how, for many of her students, the use of colours in artworks served as a means to explore creativity and initiate analysis.

Anfal's artwork, created in response to Ba Ayoon El-Akhbaar, developed across several versions. In the first version (Figure 4) Anfal copied out a poem she had composed based on the poem by al-Merri in Ba Ayoon El-Akhbaar. In the artwork, the poem is written with a feather as in olden times and presented in the style of a letter. The drawn letter Ba in the bottom right signals the connection to Ermes' artwork.

Below is the poem with translation:	
Don't blame others when they make a mistake,	لا تلم أناسًا أخطؤوا
Blame yourself that sinned,	بل لم نفسك حين تسيئ
If you look at the defects of others, you are mistaken,	لو نظرت لعيوب المرأ ، اخطأت
Blame yourself and take responsibility	فعاتب نفسك و حاسبها
The mistake is from you and not from others,	لان الخطأ منك و ليس من غيرك
You see every small thing in the eye of your friend,	فهل ترى القذى في عين اخيك
And forget the big things in yours.	وتنسى الجذع في عينك

The second version (Figure 5) shows a much closer resemblance to Ba Ayoon El-Akhbaar. The composition is similar with the large-scale letter Ba in gold dominating the painting and Anfal's poem in small writing placed at an angle within the hollow formed by the letter shape. Again
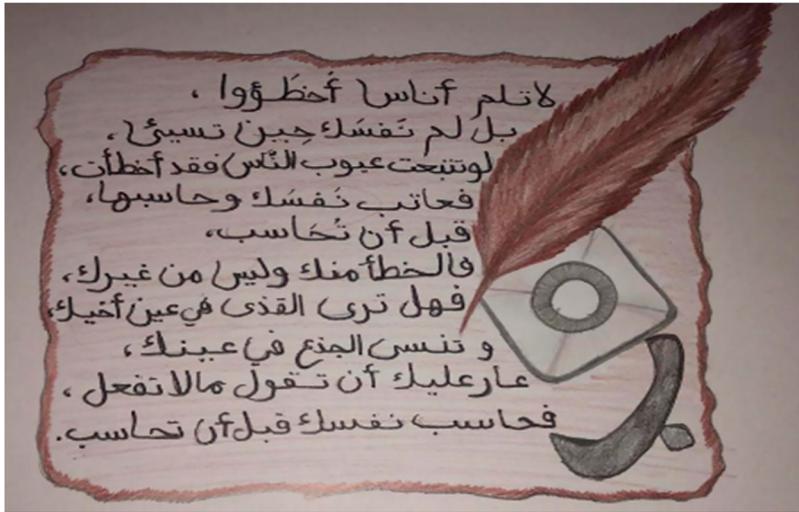
Figure 4. Anfal's first response to Ba Ayoon El-Akhbaar.

similar to Ba-Ayoon, the background is formed by a patchwork of pastel shades, the lighter ones being at the centre. There is a feeling of restless movement in the work, but ideas remain at an abstract level.

In the third and final version (Figure 6) Anfal brings together ideas and feelings dramatically, drawing on a creative synthesis between painting and poetry, visual and verbal. The poem here is the same as in the first version, but following it is the poem from Ba Ayoon El-Akhbaar. The poetry in small handwriting is placed diagonally above the Ba and between images. There are also lines placed vertically round the left-hand side of the Ba (expressing the theme of the poetry 'Do not blame others') and beside the lower outer edge of the globe (the name 'Ali Omar Ermes' in hommage to the artist who has inspired her).

As Anfal explains in her commentary, she took her inspiration from Ba Ayoon El-Akhbaar, but added her 'personal touch' to express 'how I feel about the small and big problems in the world that people are blaming each other for'. Embracing the moral position captured in al-Merri's poetry she affirms boldly that 'We shouldn't hold anyone accountable for their actions, right or wrong. It's not up to us to judge' (Commentary).

Comparing her approach to that of Ermes, Anfal notes how Ermes 'used a lot of colours to create a mood (sometimes mysterious) in his artwork' and how in her painting she has used 'warm, dark and cool colours to express my emotions towards the topics I am discussing such as war, pollution, poverty and crime'. Anfal sees use of colour as a key element in her creativity since it 'allows me to create my own individuality and flare' (Commentary).

Just as visual imagery ('dust in eyes of friend' but 'branch' in own eyes) is used in the al-Merri poem and picked up in the students' poems, so Anfal makes conscious use of visual images in her painting to symbolise elemental forces and to evoke intense, visceral responses imbued with moral fervour. The red blood streaming from the golden letter Ba, itself symbolising what is sacred and precious and shielding the tree of life, immediately draws the attention. It has been caused by a knife 'coming from the world' and this suggests that 'crime in our planet is passing its limits and … out of control'. In relation to deep red of blood, the mottled pink tones in the background may be seen as representing a process of transition towards more bloodshed and destruction. However, this gradation in colour intensity may also reflect an emotional state of growing anger and betrayal about the behaviour of those in power.

With regard to orange and yellow colours in the artwork, Anfal explains that they represent the 'freedom' that is being taken away from us. The fire drawn on the planet is intended to represent
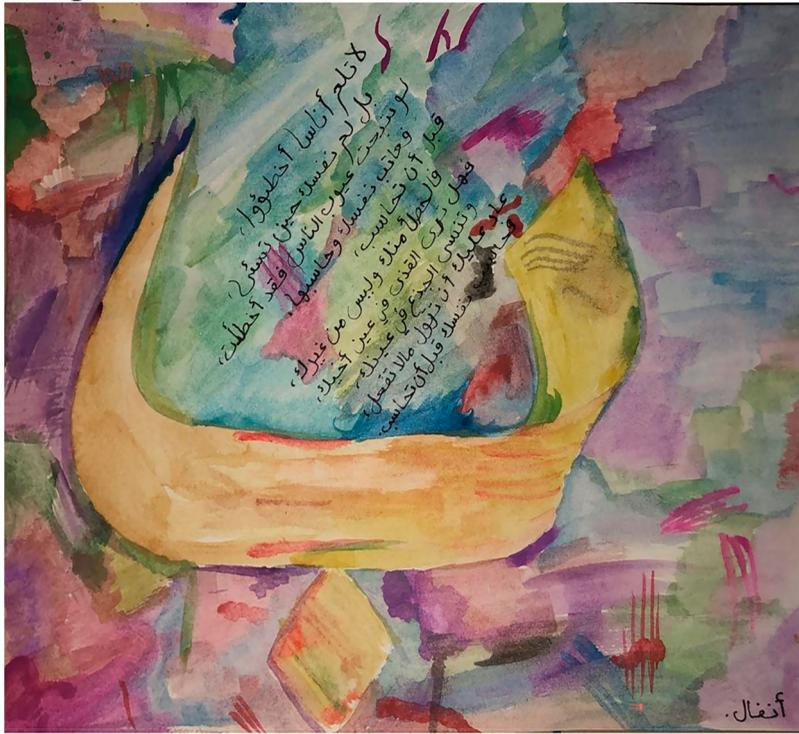
Figure 5. Anfal's second response to Ba Ayoon El-Akhbaar.

'human sins' and the 'hellfire' in the afterlife that awaits those 'who commit sins in today's life'. Pollution symbolised by the factory billowing smoke is a part of this. War, symbolised by the gun (top right), and the sufferings of the poor in society, symbolised by the girl in black (bottom right), are other parts. As for the broken heart of those 'who suffer in war, injustice and blame' (right middle), this is shown as a 'reconstructed' heart since 'no matter what, they still have hope in god'. Anfal also explains that the deathly black eagle drawn in the form of a tree with naked branches on the top left of the Ba is 'transformed to living birds' at the top of the painting as reflected in the comforting religious quote from the Quran, 'ان بعد العسر يسر', (after every hardship there is an ease) for 'We need to always remember that no matter how many problems you have, the day will come when they will all disappear.'

The inspiration taken from Ermes' Ba Ayoon El-Akhbaar' is clearly reflected in the creative fusion of painting and poetry, in the dominant letter shape (Ba), in the assertion of an Arab/Muslim identity and in the moral and spiritual values implied by this, also in the way various elements come together in a dramatic assemblage transcending space and time.

Having said this, Anfal's artwork is also very much her own. It reflects her experience, her lifeworld, her creative sensibility and skill and what she cares about. However, Fatima (Field notes: 23 January 2021) noted the evident trust built amongst students and how interactions between group members supported Anfal in creating three posters with clear progression across them both artistically and in terms of ideas (see in Figures 5–7).

Anfal describes the artwork as 'one of my favourites' and felt gratified by responses from peers and teachers both in the Peace School and in her mainstream school where she presented it as part of her GCSE art coursework. In relation to the latter she commented that 'They were all very pleased by the work after I explained the importance of the topics and the importance of the Arabic language to me'. In an email to Fatima (17 February 2021) Anfal's art teacher commented

Figure 6. العالم في السلام يسود لا لما (Why not a peaceful world?) (2021), Anfal' final piece.

on the way the work reflected her Arab background enabling her to demonstrate not only her skillset and ability as an artist, but also 'something deeper … her own unique story'. Unfortunately, such communication between colleagues working in mainstream and complementary school contexts rarely occurs.

As with Yusra, work on this project built Anfal's confidence in using Arabic and simultaneously her self-esteem as a British Arab. She sees it as important to 'talk about our tradition and show people who we are' adding that 'the more I learn my language, it makes me more proud of it, to take it outside of the Arabic school' (Group interview, May 2021). Fatima noted (Field note, 19 December 2021) how, when presenting to the class, Anfal displayed a growing sense of pride in speaking Arabic. She avoided use of English and, where she was struggling to express herself in Arabic, her classmates and Fatima chipped in with suggestions.

In a WhatsApp message to Fatima (June 2021), Anfal's mother states how 'the use of Arabic art has helped Anfal massively improve in her art skills and the ability to analyse paintings very easily and also linking it to her personal life'. She also explains the way she has become engaged in supporting her daughter by discussing ideas with her. With regard to Anfal's linguistic and personal development she makes the revealing comment that 'She became really confident speaking Arabic in public without any shame which is something we definitely need to improve in our society'.

Sirin Nasser Hussein

Sirin's work is based on two paintings by Ermes. الخاطفة الضربة ح (Haa Al-Darba Al Khatifa) (1992) and الأشهب الخاء (Al-Khaa Al-Ashhab) (1998) (Figures 7 and 8).

The two Arabic letters represented in these works have the same letter shape and are differentiated only by a dot above the Kha, which produces a different sound. Whilst Sirin was struck most by the painting of the letter shape Haa, it was the poetry in Kha that appealed more. This is

Figure 7. الضربة الخاطفة ح Haa Al-Darba Al Khatifa (1992). https://wwww.aliomarermes.co.uk

Figure 8. الخاء الأشهب Al-Khaa Al- Ashhab (1998). https://wwww.aliomarermes.co.uk

taken from the work of the tenth-century prince and warrior, Al-Hamadanis, and describes his steadfastness in the face of pain and disappointment as well as 'the noble way to treat others' (Ermes 2021).

Sirin notes in her commentary how the letter shape is 'represented expressively in a distinct and mysterious way'. The brushwork in both paintings, particularly the Haa, is fluid and dramatic. The letter shapes do not appear as fixed, static elements but as dynamic living forms – moody, tortuous, explosive – and this is what struck students in Sirin's group when they began to think about and discuss the works through WhatsApp and GoogleMeets. The group noticed the separation of upper and lower parts of the letter shape and, taken together with the surrounding paint splatters and dribbles, saw this as the Haa 'either falling apart or trying to get together'. For Sirin the splatters and dribbles also 'symbolize the idea of tears and … sadness'. She saw an important connection here with the poetic extract inscribed on the side of the letter Khaa noting that 'The poem is very powerful and is reflective of the painting as it discusses patience and not caring about what others say'. Sirin's group translated this as follows:

Patience until there is no remaining of me	صَبورٌ وَلوِ لَم تَبقَ مِنّي بَقيّة
I will be truthful regardless of the results even if swords are involved	قَوولٌ وَلو أَنَّ السُيوفَ جَواب
You won't always get rewarded for your achievements	وَما كُلُّ فَعّالٍ يُجازى بِفعله
My response is not there for everyone	وَلا كُلّ قَوّالٍ لَدَيّ يُجاب
Not all sayings which I hear affect me, they are like a buzzing bee.	وَرُبَّ كَلامٍ مَرَّ فَوقَ مَسامِعي
	كَما طَنَّ فيَ لَوح الهَجير ذُباب

At this point, Sirin drew on the two works by Ermes and 'his idea of patience during hardship to write my own story about a family who has lost their father which was based on what happened to

me and my family and what we went through.' Fatima noted (Field notes, 6 March 2021) how the emotion expressed in the works by Ermes inspired Sirin to be able to share a deeply painful life experience. This would not have happened though had she not also felt that she was in a safe space in which she could open up to others.

The story is presented in the form of a poster (Figure 9) entitled 'Patience is Best', a quotation from the Quran, and linked to Sirin's personal experience 'as the family had to stay patient regardless of the father's death'.

At the top left of the poster is a 'metaphoric heart … which has been stabbed by a sharp flower' and this symbolises 'the loving relationship between the woman and her father in the story'. Reinforcing this idea, at the bottom left Sirin has drawn a happy father and daughter to suggest their close relationship. Behind the text on the poster is a faint drawing of the letter Haa revealing the inspiration that came from Ermes' work.

Following this preparatory work Sirin went on to create a final monochrome piece (Figure 10) foregrounding the letter Haa.

Clearly inspired by Ermes' work Sirin explains in her commentary that she 'tried to make it as similar to his painting as possible but with my own touch, according to my story which I wrote'. The theme of the work is reflected in a small inscription on the side of the letter, a citation from the Quran meaning 'patience is best'. She then 'proceeded to surround the figure with black droplets and water droplets symbolising tears, and sadness'. Sirin notes that 'The rough and messy aspect of the painting also reflects back to its meaning and that not everything is perfect however you need to have patience'. The twisted letter form Haa is broken into two parts with ragged ends adding to a sense of movement and tension. The silhouette in the bottom left of a man (the father) holding up a girl (his daughter), as in the poster, captures a feeling of joy which contrasts with an overall mood of darkness. Sirin explains that the image 'refers back to my own personal story where the girl lost her father'. The poem on the top right, composed and translated by Sirin (see below) and echoing the poetry in Ermes' work 'discusses patience and its rewards, specifically in Islamic terms'.

Figure 9. Poster capturing Sirin's personal story.

Figure 10. Final piece by Sirin.

Patience is best	فَصَبرٌ جَمِيلٌ
Patience, the answer to injustice	الصبر جواب على تحمل ظلم العباد
Patience, faith and confidentiality to silence	الصبر إيمان قناعة كتمان
Patience, the answer to faithfulness	الصبر جواب على الوفاء
With difficulty, there is ease	إن مع العسر يسرا
Oh human no fear, nor worry	فلا خوف و لا قلق أيها الانسان
You shall be rewarded for thy patience, nor get held accountable	فجزاء الصبر بغير حساب
Patience is faith, joy of thou human	الصبر ايمان سعادة الإنسان
No joy for thou human with no patience	فلا سعادة دون صبر جميل
Remain strong, thou human	صبر جميل والله المستعان
Do not wait for favours	بدون صبر فالقهر والعدوان
Patience is the response to any bearing	فكن قويا ايه الانسان
Obedience to the lord of servants.	ولا تنتظر معروفا
Patience, the answer to all hardship	فالصبر جواب لكل تحمل
and a form of obedience to the creator	و طاعة لرب العباد

Impressed by the clarity and sophistication of Sirin's writing, Fatima notes (Field notes, 23 January 2021) how, consistent with the 'nathr' style, the writing 'is aphoristic … and draws on references to the holy Quran such as صبر جميل (Patience is best), إن مع العسر يسرا (With difficulty, there is ease) and صبر جميل والله المستعان (So patience is best. It is Allah whose help is sought) which

was pronounced by the prophet Jacob (Peace be upon him) when he lost his son Joseph (Peace be upon him) Emphasising both the personal and a strong sense of religious identity, Fatima explains how 'Sirin used this to mirror her own experience of losing her father and her need to be patient during this difficult time as per the Quranic verses shared' (Field notes, 23 October 2021). Sirin's classmates were deeply moved by her story and decided to base a short film on it.

Reflecting on the experience of integrating visual art with her Arabic language learning Sirin is clear about the benefits this has brought: ' … during my Arabic studies art has definitely extended my appreciation towards art and the Arabic language and it's made me realise that there's more to Arabic than what the textbook provides you with and it's way more interesting' (Sirin – Int 2020). This has opened up new pathways to learning and a new sense of herself as a budding poet and artist: 'It made me very proud of myself that I was capable of writing my own poem and painting my own art by using Ali Omar Ermes' art as my inspiration' (Sirin – Int 2020). This brought home to Fatima how language learning, when it occurs within a transformative pedagogical framework, can provide spaces for personal development and positive identity construction (Field notes, 27 March 2021).

Reflections

The intensive focus within the case study approach has brought a number of important insights which are of particular significance for heritage language learners and we now look at these in relation to the research questions identified in the introduction:

1. In what ways can personal interactions with (text)art works provide a stimulating context for heritage language-and-culture learning?

The data, in particular commentaries by the students, shows how encouraging students to make connections between artworks and their personal feelings as well as with their own lived experience generates a real sense of excitement and lends a sense of purpose and relevance to Arabic language and culture learning (often lacking in the traditional classroom).

The transformative and empowering nature of the journey undertaken emerges most vividly in the students' paintings themselves which unsettle dominant narratives, embodying an alternative set of values, a remaking of culture, a transmodal multifaceted aesthetic and a sense of movement and possibility.

2. What is the process that students go through as they move from responding to textart works to creating pieces of their own?

Mapping the process of assemblage that students carried out, in relation to letter shapes, poetry translation and composition and painting, integrating various symbolic forms, revealed the different journeys that each student took and the affective, visceral and aesthetic as well as intellectual factors at work. Fatima's observations as well students' comments on their artwork showed how using visual art in the language classroom can introduce 'a productive form of slowing down as there is more potential to dwell within the words and meaning' (Fleming 2021, 10). This is reflective of the post-modern perspective identified in the theory section including processes of languaging and transsemiotisation. It is also consistent with a socio-cultural view of learning and the co-construction of knowledge. The students' artworks are an authentic and truthful expression of a personal learning experience which makes them both intriguing and moving.

3. What is the value of translation and poetry writing activities within this approach?

Translation carried out within the framework of the unit of work was seen to bring various benefits reflected in student commentaries as well as teacher observations. These included

expansion of vocabulary, deeper appreciation of word connotations and of the way meanings are inscribed differently in different languages and metalinguistic awareness. It developed sensitivity towards the sensory and emotional attributes of words as well as towards cultural resonances and here the intersemiotic relationship also clearly played a part. Importantly, the flexible movement across languages involved in translation work enhanced students' sense of themselves as multicompetent language users. With regard to poetry writing this fitted naturally with the artistically formed letter shapes and with the aesthetics of painting. It developed students' imaginative use of language including the ability to appreciate and use metaphor.

4. How do aesthetic considerations affect the creative process and the intertextual relationships involved?

The ability to perceive and then to creatively represent alternative versions of reality, in this case through assemblages of letter shapes, poetry and painting, is what aesthetics, languaging and culture-making is all about. In this unit of work students were invited to explore the meaning-making potential of language and art not as separate modes but intertextually within a 'translanguaging space' (Li and Ho 2018). Students' artwork reflects, for example, how students, following Ermes, experimented with the design of letter shapes (including size, colour, style) in relation to the painted background and also with the placement of poetic inscriptions and headings in relation to letter shapes. It also reflects how use of colour as well as splashes and dribbles are used effectively to establish mood and to convey emotion. This kind of text construction is very different from the traditional academic essay and reflects the multimodal nature of contemporary communications.

5. Can active engagement with visual artworks open up a space for personal development, negotiation of identity and finding a voice?

Both student commentaries and Fatima's observations reflect strongly the transformative significance of work undertaken for students' confidence, enabling them to foster and take pride in translingual-transcultural being and to bolster a sense of self-efficacy. They show how religious and spiritual dimensions as well as funds of knowledge in the home contributed to this (González, Moll, and Amanti 2005). They also show how the pedagogical approach made space for student agency and for countering monolingual discourses and essentialised perspectives on language and culture. They further show how students developed a sense of themselves as global citizens with the right to speak.

6. What contribution can this approach make to reshaping pedagogies for language learning in particular for heritage learners?

The data shows both how and why fostering connections between visual art and intercultural language learning provides a rich and engaging context for heritage language learners not least because it takes account of their socio-affective needs. What we see illustrated in the present study is a postmodern perspective on language and culture education which moves beyond narrow functional goals associated with communicative approaches to embrace symbolic, personal, spiritual and aesthetic dimensions where the identities of language learners are engaged through a process of becoming (Norton 2013; Kramsch 2021; Fleming 2021) and which also foster an outward-looking critical cosmopolitan disposition (Hawkins 2018).

Having said this, we must recognise that research into interdisciplinary work combining heritage languages and visual art is at an early stage of development. Moreover, although significant insights have been gained from the present study, this has occurred within certain limitations: The detailed case study has concentrated on the work of three intermediate-level students in a London complementary school where the work of Ali Omar Ermes has been a focus for

language and visual artwork for some time. There is a need to examine how the approach works in other contexts and with students of different ages and language backgrounds as well as in relation to different kinds of artwork. Building on the poetry dimension within this study there needs to be further investigation into different forms of ekphrastic poetry and how this can develop both appreciation of visual art and language(s) including how words and images relate to each other. Finally, there needs to be consideration of ways in which applying an arts-based research (ABR) lens within an overall ethnographic approach can extend and enhance understanding of student interactions at the interface between language(s), culture and visual art.

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Fatima Khaled is Head Teacher of the Peace School in North London, a complementary school that provides Arabic language and culture learning for more than one hundred bilingual students. She is committed to cross-curricular, project-based approaches which allow students to invest themselves emotionally in their work and promote student agency and voice. Fatima has participated in the ground-breaking Critical Connections: Multilingual Digital Storytelling Project (2012– ongoing) led by Goldsmiths, University of London. This has included the creation and implementation of a cross-curricular resource combining art and Arabic language teaching entitled 'Language in art and the work of Ali Omar Ermes'. Passionate about her subject Fatima is a regular contributor to professional development events for teachers of Arabic in the UK and overseas, focussing in particular on the needs of heritage language learners. She works nationally with various organisations to help develop approaches to language learning and is a member of the Association for Language Learning Council as well as working with Scottish CILT. Internationally Fatima works closely with Qatar Foundation International (QFI) as well as with Arabic teachers in Australia to help heritage and non-heritage learners. She is currently completing her doctorate in language education.

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Permission to include images of artworks created by Ali Omar Ermes has been kindly provided by Mohammed Ermes (Commercial Director, Ali Omar Ermes Art).

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