

Injustice and Active Citizenship: Using Arabic in Authentic Community Contexts at Peace School

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Case Study

This case study focuses on a group of 10 students aged between 12 and 17, who participated in a 10-week Life Skills and Social Action programme in collaboration with NCS (National Citizen Service) and Start Easy. The students were heritage Arabic learners at intermediate to advanced levels of proficiency, following Maria Carreira's proficiency-oriented framework, which emphasizes what learners can do with language in real-life communicative contexts rather than focusing solely on grammar, memorization, or assessment.

The aim of the project was to encourage students to explore issues of social injustice, identity, and active citizenship while using Arabic and English in authentic and meaningful ways. Rather than learning language for tests or examinations, students were given opportunities to express their ideas, reflect on their experiences, and engage with the wider community through creative and socially relevant projects.

This approach reflects a broader vision of heritage language education in which students develop linguistic skills alongside confidence, identity, and civic engagement, positioning language as a living tool for communication, expression, and social participation.

Project Overview

During the 2024 NCS and Start Easy project, students explored the theme of injustice and Islamophobia, discussing their personal experiences and reflecting on how language, identity, and community shape their understanding of social issues. The project encouraged students to engage in dialogue, share perspectives, and develop creative responses to real-world challenges.

As part of the project, students created a film in Arabic with English subtitles, which documented their reflections on injustice, identity, and belonging. The film was entirely student-led, with students developing the concept, discussing the key themes, and shaping the final narrative. This process allowed them to use Arabic in an authentic context, expressing personal and social experiences while communicating with a wider audience through English subtitles.

The film became a powerful tool for student voice, enabling learners to communicate their experiences in a structured and meaningful way. It also strengthened their confidence in using Arabic as a language of expression, not only within the classroom but also in public and community contexts.

In 2025, students were invited by the Young Brent Foundation to participate in an Islamophobia awareness community event, which provided an opportunity to extend their learning beyond the classroom and engage directly with a wider audience.

At the event, students designed and managed their own stand, where they presented their bilingual film and shared their learning journey with visitors. They also showcased artwork inspired by Ali Omar Hermes, featuring Arabic letters conveying messages, poems, and proverbs such as “peace means justice.” The stand was entirely student-led, with students introducing the film, explaining their project, and interacting with audience members.

Visitors were particularly interested in students’ experiences of learning Arabic and their involvement in the project. Audience members asked questions about the film, the artwork, and the students’ journey of learning Arabic, and students responded confidently, expressing pride in their bilingual abilities and cultural identity.

This experience allowed students to use Arabic in a real-life context, demonstrating their ability to communicate meaningfully with diverse audiences and participate actively in community discussions.

Student Learning and Impact

The project had a significant impact on students’ language development, confidence, and sense of identity. By engaging in real-life communication and community interaction, students were able to see Arabic as a living and meaningful language rather than simply a subject to be studied.

Students developed stronger oral communication skills, particularly in presenting their film and explaining their ideas to visitors. They also gained confidence in public speaking, as they introduced their project and interacted with audience members in a community setting.

The bilingual film allowed students to use Arabic for personal expression and storytelling, while English subtitles ensured accessibility for a wider audience. This bilingual approach strengthened students’ ability to move between languages and communicate effectively in different contexts.

The project also supported learner agency and leadership, as students were responsible for planning their stand, presenting their work, and engaging with the audience. This level of responsibility helped students develop independence, teamwork, and problem-solving skills.

Most importantly, students began to see themselves as active contributors to society, using language as a tool to share their experiences and raise awareness about social issues. This

shift from classroom learning to community engagement reinforced the value of heritage language education in supporting active citizenship and social participation.

Student Voices

Students expressed strong feelings of pride and ownership throughout the project.

One student reflected that “sharing Arabic art at the stand made our ideas feel real and important.” Another explained that “sharing the bilingual film helped people understand our experiences in both languages.”

Students also emphasized the importance of independence and responsibility, with one student stating, “we planned the stand and presented everything ourselves — it showed we can use language in real life and share it with others.”

These reflections highlight how the project helped students develop confidence, identity, and a sense of purpose, demonstrating the importance of authentic language use in heritage language education.

Community and Stakeholder Engagement

The Islamophobia awareness event brought together a wide range of stakeholders, including charities, local officials, Members of Parliament, faith organizations, and community members. This created a valuable opportunity for students to engage with different audiences and share their work in a public setting.

Through their interaction with visitors, students were able to communicate their ideas, explain their film, and discuss their learning journey in both Arabic and English. This engagement strengthened the connection between heritage language learning and community participation, showing how supplementary schools can play an important role in fostering dialogue and social awareness.

The collaboration with NCS, Start Easy, and the Young Brent Foundation demonstrates how civil society partnerships can enrich heritage language education by providing real-life platforms for student voice and engagement. These partnerships allowed students to move beyond the classroom and participate in meaningful social action, reinforcing the role of language learning in supporting active citizenship.

Pedagogical Significance

This case study illustrates the value of Maria Carreira’s proficiency-oriented framework, which focuses on what learners can do with language in real-life contexts. By creating a film, presenting their work, and interacting with the community, students were able to use Arabic

for authentic communication and social engagement, rather than for exam preparation. This approach allows students to experience language as a living, meaningful tool for expression, reflection, and participation in society.

The project also reflects a translingual pedagogical approach, where Arabic and English were used flexibly to support communication, identity, and participation. Rather than separating languages, students were encouraged to use their full linguistic repertoire to express ideas and engage with diverse audiences. This bilingual, flexible use of language reinforces motivation, engagement, and confidence in learners, as they see their skills applied in tangible, impactful ways.

In addition, the integration of arts-based learning, project-based learning, and community engagement supported learner agency and creativity. Students became cultural mediators, sharing Arabic art, language, and identity with the wider community and encouraging audience participation. This approach demonstrates how supplementary schools can move beyond traditional “safe spaces” and become spaces of active citizenship, where heritage language learning connects directly with social justice, identity, and public participation.

Conclusion

The Peace School project demonstrates how Arabic language learning can be transformed through authentic community engagement and civil society partnerships. By creating a bilingual film, presenting their work at a public event, and interacting directly with diverse audiences, students were able to use Arabic in meaningful real-life contexts, developing confidence, identity, and social awareness.

Crucially, this approach enables students to learn Arabic for authentic communication rather than for exams. By applying language skills to real-world issues, students experience Arabic as a tool for personal expression, storytelling, and civic participation. This shift from classroom-based, assessment-focused learning to meaningful, socially engaged practice reinforces the value of heritage language education as a medium for active citizenship, cultural connection, and lifelong language development.

The project highlights the importance of learner agency, bilingual communication, and community engagement, offering a practical model for supplementary schools seeking to connect language learning with social action, personal growth, and societal impact.

Context

Peace School is a supplementary Arabic school based in North West London that operates every Saturday from 09:00 to 14:30, providing Arabic language and cultural education to bilingual heritage learners. The school integrates language learning with life skills, community engagement, and social action, creating opportunities for students to use Arabic in meaningful, authentic contexts beyond traditional classroom exercises or exam preparation.

Images :



Figure 1. Peace School students presenting their bilingual film and interacting with audience members.



Figure 2. Students showcasing artwork inspired by Ali Omar Ermes at the Islamophobia awareness event



Figure 3. Audience members creating artwork at the student-led stand.

Other images





