



Seeing Through Art: A Case Study on Transforming Students' Perspectives in the EFL Context

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigates how the integration of art in education can have an impact on adolescent EFL learners' perspectives, empathy development, and language use in relation to the refugee crisis. The intervention was implemented in a Greek public junior high school with 15 learners aged 14 at a B1 (CEFR) level. Drawing on the Critical and Creative Learning through Aesthetic Experience framework and Project Zero's Visible Thinking routines, students engaged with photography, sculpture, and film through a structured six-stage process. Data was collected through pre- and post-intervention written reflections, classroom observations, and student-generated questions. The inductive thematic analysis showed a meaningful transformation in participants' perspectives. Initially marked by negative and stereotypical views, their responses gradually reflected greater empathy and deeper understanding. At the same time, there were clear improvements in their ability to interpret meaning, express evaluations, and engage more confidently and effectively in English interactions. The findings suggest that arts-integrated approaches can simultaneously support socio-emotional development and meaningful language learning in EFL contexts. The study provides a clear model that teachers and researchers can use to explore complex social issues in language education.

Keywords: arts-integrated EFL, empathy, refugee education, aesthetic learning

Introduction

In recent years, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has increasingly been viewed not only as a field for language development but also for critical engagement with social issues. Scholars in applied linguistics argue that language learning is inseparable from learners' social positioning, experiences, and investment in meaning-making (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Within this shift, EFL classrooms are expected to boost critical thinking, intercultural awareness, and engagement with global issues.

The use of art in pedagogy has emerged as a promising approach in this context. Based in Dewey's (1980) notion of aesthetic experience as active meaning-making, arts-based learning

integrates cognitive, emotional, and ethical dimensions. Research suggests that the use of art promotes reflection, openness to multiple perspectives, and tolerance for the Other—capacities aligned with advanced language use and critical literacy (Eisner, 2005; Kokkos, 2021). Recent empirical studies further demonstrate that arts-integrated language instruction enhances learner motivation, engagement, and language performance by supporting multimodal meaning-making and emotional involvement (Lee, 2025)

Alongside arts-integrated education, research on empathy and perspective change emphasizes learning through experience. Transformative learning theory suggests that people change their perspectives when they reflect on their beliefs, engage in dialogue, and have emotionally meaningful experiences. Artistic experiences can challenge our usual ways of seeing the world and encourage us to rethink social realities through symbols and imagination (Fleming, 2023). Such processes are particularly relevant when addressing complex and sensitive issues.

One such issue is migration and the global refugee crisis. Research on refugee education warns against negative and stereotypical narratives that portray refugees as problem. (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Instead, researchers promote pedagogies that highlight refugees' histories and contributions while fostering moral responsibility and intercultural understanding among host communities. EFL classrooms have been identified as important spaces for cultivating such understandings through narrative engagement, critical inquiry, and dialogue (Block et al., 2019). Studies further suggest that engaging language learners with refugee narratives and intercultural content can foster global competence, empathy, and critical intercultural awareness, enabling students to reflect on migration from more humanistic and socially responsible perspectives (Sharma, 2021)

Despite growing interest in socially engaged and arts-based pedagogies, empirical classroom-based studies in EFL contexts remain limited. Few studies research how aesthetic engagement supports both perspective transformation and measurable language learning outcomes. Moreover, although Project Zero's Visible Thinking routines have been widely used to scaffold observation, questioning, interpretation, and reflection, their systematic application in EFL classrooms addressing refugee-related themes has received little empirical attention. Recent studies also emphasize that structured reflective routines and arts-based inquiry enhance learners' interpretive thinking, emotional engagement, and language development by supporting deeper cognitive and affective processing (Lauss & Helm, 2025).

The present study addresses these gaps by examining a structured arts-integrated intervention in a Greek junior high school EFL classroom. Drawing on the Critical and Creative Learning through Aesthetic Experience framework and Project Zero's Visible Thinking routines, the study explores how engagement with visual art and film shapes adolescents' perceptions of refugees. It also investigates how these processes intersect with EFL learning, including students' use of interpretive, evaluative, and reflective language.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are EFL learners' initial perceptions of refugees and their impact on local populations?
2. How does engagement with artistic materials influence these perceptions?
3. In what ways does arts-integrated pedagogy support empathy development, critical reflection, and language use in the EFL classroom?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to debates on arts integration, refugee education, and socially responsive EFL teaching, offering a transparent model for practice-oriented research.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018), appropriate for exploring perspective transformation within a classroom context. A qualitative approach was selected because the research aimed to capture learners' evolving interpretations, emotions, and language use, which cannot be adequately represented through quantitative measures alone.

2.2 Participants and Context

The participants were 15 students (8 female, 7 male) aged 14, enrolled in a public junior high school in Greece. All participants were studying English as a foreign language at a B1 level (CEFR). The school serves a semi-urban population, and students had limited prior exposure to structured arts-based learning or explicit discussions of refugee-related issues within the EFL curriculum. The intervention was conducted across five 45-minute instructional sessions. The structured sequence included initial reflection, aesthetic engagement, observation, questioning, interpretation, and final reflection.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the school administration. Written parental consent and student assent were secured prior to data collection. Students were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time.

The data were anonymized, and responses were labeled using identifiers such as "Student 1," "Student 2," etc.

2.4 Instructional Framework

The intervention followed the six-stage Critical and Creative Learning through Aesthetic Experience framework, informed by Project Zero's Visible Thinking routines. The stages were:

1. Initial reflection
2. Engagement with artistic stimuli
3. Observation
4. Question formulation
5. Interpretation and connection to critical questions
6. Final reflection

A detailed description of tasks, timing, and assessment artifacts is provided in Appendix C.

2.5 Materials

Students engaged with four types of materials:

1. a journalistic text on refugees' mental health in Greece,
2. a photograph by Bertien van Manen (*Immigrants from Algeria*),
3. a sculptural artwork by Abdulrahman Katanani (*Childhood*),
4. selected excerpts from the feature film *Welcome* (Lioret, 2009), accessed through a legally obtained educational copy.

Materials were selected for their symbolic density and relevance to students' lived experiences. Full descriptions, sources, and contextual information for all artistic materials are provided in Appendix A.

2.5.1. Reading Text

A news article from *Greek Reporter* (2016) describing the psychological difficulties faced by refugees living in reception camps in Greece. The text served as the initial stimulus for eliciting students' existing perceptions and prompted their first written reflections on the broader refugee situation.

2.5.2. Photograph

Immigrants from Algeria by Bertien van Manen (2002–2005), a photograph depicting a porcelain tea set with a blurred family portrait in the background. Its symbolic elements—overturned cups, faded figures, and domestic objects—were selected to encourage close observation, interpretation, and emotional engagement.

2.5.3. Sculptural artwork

Childhood (2015) by Abdulrahman Katanani, created from tin, zinc, and recycled materials sourced from refugee camps. The faceless figures and use of harsh materials were chosen to support discussions on displacement, identity, and universality.

2.5.4. Film Excerpts

Four selected excerpts from the feature film *Welcome* (Lioret, 2009), which narrates the journey of a young refugee attempting to cross from France to the United Kingdom. The clips were chosen for their strong emotional content, clear symbolism (e.g., borders, water, wire fences), and narrative portrayal of moral transformation.

All materials were selected according to the Critical and Creative Learning through Aesthetic Experience framework, which emphasises the use of rich, multimodal stimuli to prompt interpretation, dialogue, and perspective transformation.

2.6 Methodology Framework

The intervention followed the six-stage Critical and Creative Learning through Aesthetic Experience methodology. This framework structures the learning process through observation, inquiry, interpretation, and reflection.

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) updated framework, emphasizing reflexivity, transparency, and analytic rigor.

2.7 Procedure

2.7.1 Stage 1: Initial Reflection

Students read the news article that highlighted the depression and stress experienced by refugees living in camps (Greek Reporter, 2016) and individually responded to the question: "How do refugees impact the lives of local populations?" The text, however, did not address the perspectives of the local population or the potential positive impacts of the refugee crisis on Europe. The full text of the article is provided in Appendix B. Their written responses were collected as baseline data on their initial perceptions.

2.7.2. Stage 2: Engagement with Artistic Materials

The following artworks were used as stimuli in the instructional intervention.

1. A photo
2. A sculptural artwork made of zinc and recyclable materials
3. Excerpts from a movie

Each material served as a stimulus for observation and inquiry in the subsequent stages. They were related to the critical questions expressed. (Table 1)

A PHOTO	
Title	Immigrants from Algeria
Artist	Bertien van Manen
Features	Photo
Year	2002-2005
Source	https://www.moma.org/collection/works/98406?locale=en
Museum	The Museum of Modern Arts / New York
	

A sculptural artwork	
Title	Childhood
Artist	Abdulrahman Katanani
Features	A sculptural artwork made of zinc (zinc and materials from refugee camps)
Year	2015
Source	http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/2361
Museum	The Barjeel Art Foundation



A MOVIE	
 Original title	Welcome
Summary	After a journey of 4,000 kilometers, young Bilal arrives from Iraq in Calais and tries unsuccessfully to cross to Great Britain to meet his beloved. Unable to cross the English Channel in any other way, he decides to attempt it by swimming, finding an unexpected ally in the person of his teacher Simon.
Director	Philippe Lloret
Duration	110 minutes
Year of production	2009
Country of production	France
Source	Film excerpts were selected from the feature film Welcome (Loiret, 2009), accessed through a legally obtained educational DVD copy.

Selection of excerpts	[27.14 - 29.53], [36.12 -42.20], [1.13.00-1.15.12], [1.38.40-1.42.20]
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Table 1: All artistic materials are related to the critical questions expressed.

	1	2
Immigrants from Algeria	x	
Childhood	x	x
Welcome	x	x

First, it is essential that the projects stimulate students' critical thinking.

For this reason, they must be of high aesthetic value since, according to the Frankfurt School (Adorno, 1997) and Castoriadis (Castoriadis, 1997), these works are unconventional and can be interpreted in many ways, promoting critical reflection.

It is also necessary to take into account students who are not familiar with art. Thus, the works must have a representational character in order to be understandable. (Bamford, 2006). In addition, the works must be related to the students' experiences in order to cultivate critical thinking.

2.8 Data Collection

Data sources included:

- pre- and post-intervention written reflections,
- classroom observations recorded in field notes,
- student-generated questions and interpretive statements during discussions.

2.8.1 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model. First, all data was coded for perceptions of refugees, emotions, and language use. These codes were then grouped into broader themes. Comparing pre- and post-intervention texts allowed us to identify changes in understanding and attitudes. To enhance trustworthiness, coding decisions were reviewed by a second EFL educator experienced in qualitative research. Differences in interpretation were discussed until everyone agreed. Using multiple data sources and keeping a clear record of the analysis also helped make the findings more trustworthy.

2.8.2 Researcher's Position and Perspective

The researcher was also the students' EFL teacher, providing engagement and contextual insight while introducing potential bias. To deal with this, reflective field notes were maintained, and students' written data were analyzed independently of classroom performance or assessment. Attention was also given to negative and contradictory cases.

3. Results

3.1 Initial Student Perspectives (Pre-intervention)

Before the intervention, most written reflections viewed refugees in a negative or limited way. Eleven out of fifteen students (73%) viewed refugees primarily as a social or economic burden,

frequently using generalized and impersonal language (e.g., “*they create problems*,” “*they affect our economy*”). Only two students expressed references to refugees’ emotional experiences or shared human conditions, while empathetic or reflective language was largely absent. From an EFL perspective, pre-intervention texts were typically short, relying on limited lexical range and simple declarative structures.

3.2 Quantitative Shift in Perceptions

Although the study is qualitative in design, shifts in perspective were also numerically observable. The table 2 below presents the frequency of the three overarching themes identified across pre- and post-intervention reflections.

Table 2: Pre and post intervention

Theme	Pre-Intervention	Post-Intervention
Negative perspectives (Social Burden)	11 students (73%)	2 students (13%)
Empathy and Shared Humanity	2 students (13%)	13 students (87%)
Interpretive Agency (Symbolic Language)	1 student (7%)	11 students (73%)

The most notable shift concerns empathy, which increased from 13% to 87% of students. At the same time, deficit-oriented framing decreased substantially. In addition, students increasingly demonstrated interpretive agency, meaning they were able to attribute symbolic meaning and use speculative language when discussing artistic stimuli.

To better understand how these shifts occurred, the following section presents the thematic analysis process and resulting conceptual transformations.

3.3 Thematic Analysis and Coding Process

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted across all data sources, including written reflections, observation notes, and student-generated questions. Initial open coding generated 27 codes, such as fear of crime, economic strain, loss of home, symbolic objects, family unity, and shared history.

These codes were then grouped into three overarching themes representing both conceptual and linguistic development:

- From Negative perspectives to Shared Humanity
- From Emotional Distance to Empathy
- From Surface Description to Interpretive Agency

Coding decisions were reviewed collaboratively with a second EFL educator. Discrepancies were discussed until agreement was reached, enhancing analytic credibility and transparency.

The following sections illustrate these transformations using representative student data.

3.4 From Negative perspectives to Shared Humanity

Pre-intervention reflections frequently portrayed refugees as a societal problem. Students often used collective pronouns and generalized claims:

Student 3 (Pre-Intervention):

“Refugees cause problems in the streets and make local people feel unsafe.”

Post-intervention discourse showed increased recognition of shared human experiences:

Student 3 (Post-Intervention):

“Looking at the sculpture *Childhood*, the cold metal shows how hard their life is, but the family walks together. They are not a problem to solve; they are people trying to survive.”

This shift suggests movement from externalized judgment toward relational and ethical understanding.

3.5 From Emotional Distance to Empathy

Initially, many students positioned refugees as distant and disconnected from their own reality:

Student 9 (Pre-Intervention):

“They come because of war, but it is far from us.”

Following engagement with the photograph and film excerpts, students increasingly articulated emotional resonance:

Student 9 (Post-Intervention):

“The overturned cups in the photo make me feel their loss. It is like they left their home suddenly. I feel sadness and nostalgia too.”

Empathy was often expressed through affective vocabulary (*sadness, loss, nostalgia*) and first-person positioning, suggesting deeper emotional engagement.

3.6 From Surface Description to Interpretive Agency

Before the intervention, students tended to describe visual stimuli literally: “It is just a photo of a mess.”

After structured observation and inquiry routines, students demonstrated more advanced interpretive reasoning:

“The zinc metal might represent the cold walls between people.”

“The blurred picture could suggest a forgotten past.”

Post-intervention reflections showed:

- increased use of speculative modality (might represent, could suggest)
- expanded emotional and ethical vocabulary
- more complex sentence structures
- integration of symbolic reasoning

This development reflects both conceptual growth and increased interpretive competence in English.

3.7 EFL Learning Outcomes

In addition to socio-emotional shifts, students demonstrated measurable language gains. There was an increased use of evaluative and speculative language, such as “might represent” or “could suggest,” which marks a move toward higher-order thinking in English. Written texts became *longer and more coherent*, and students utilized a richer emotional and ethical vocabulary (e.g., “nostalgia,” “displacement”) compared to their baseline reflections. These outcomes align with **B1 CEFR descriptors** for production and interaction

3.8 Negative and Contradictory Cases

To maintain analytical rigor, the study examined two students who held ambivalent **positions** post-intervention. While they expressed empathy for refugees' suffering, they remained concerned about local economic pressures. These were retained as negative cases to ensure the findings accurately reflect the non-uniform nature of perspective transformation

Discussion

Findings indicate that art served as a catalyst for emotional and cognitive transformation, allowing students to question stereotypes and develop empathy. Consistent with Dewey (1980), the artworks enabled deep exploration of complex realities through symbolism. The students' evolving recognition of shared human values aligns with Kokkos (2021), who emphasizes art's role in perspective transformation. Pedagogical implications include the potential for art to enhance critical thinking, emotional engagement, and meaningful language learning. Limitations include the small sample size and absence of long-term follow-up. Future research may incorporate interviews, compare art-based versus non-art approaches, and explore similar interventions across ages and cultural contexts. Consistent with research in arts-integrated language education (Cummins & Early, 2015; Pinner, 2019), students' empathetic engagement was accompanied by expanded evaluative and interpretive language use.

Conclusion

This study suggests that art-based approaches, can effectively challenge students' preconceived notions about refugees and bring up more inclusive, empathetic attitudes. By engaging with multiple forms of art—visual, material, and cinematic—students were able to see beyond media stereotypes, connect emotionally with refugee narratives, and develop critical perspectives on their own values and responsibilities. As many scholars and educators claim, art is the presentation of the abyss. Great works of art do not offer closure but open us to other meanings, showing the ungroundedness of what is instituted.” (Castoriadis 2016) Art enabled emotional resonance, critical reflection, and intercultural understanding, confirming its potential as a transformative educational tool.

By offering a transparent and replicable instructional and analytic framework, this study contributes to practice-oriented scholarship at the intersection of arts-based pedagogy, refugee education, and EFL learning.

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Appendix A

Artistic Materials

A1. Photograph

Title: *Immigrants from Algeria*

Artist: Bertien van Manen

Year: 2002–2005

Medium: Photograph

Source: Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York

Link: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/98406?locale=en>

Description:

The artwork depicts a porcelain tea set placed in front of a blurred photograph of children. The floral designs, overturned cups, and indistinct faces evoke nostalgia, absence, and loss. Students examined symbolism such as the overturned cups (interpreted as absent family members) and the blurred photo (a fading past).

A2. A sculptural artwork

Title: *Childhood*

Artist: Abdulrahman Katanani

Year: 2015

Medium: Tin, zinc, and recycled materials from refugee camps

Source: Barjeel Art Foundation

Link: <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/2361>

Description:

The sculptural artwork shows faceless figures, including two children, walking with their belongings. The use of harsh, cold metal contrasts with softer fabrics and evokes displacement, exhaustion, and universality. Students noted the anonymity of the figures, symbolizing the shared nature of forced migration.

A3. Feature Film Excerpts

Film Title: *Welcome*

Director: Philippe Lioret

Country: France

Year: 2009

Duration: 110 minutes -*Film excerpts were selected from the feature film Welcome (Lioret, 2009), accessed through a legally obtained educational DVD copy.*

Summary:

The film follows Bilal, a young Iraqi refugee, and Simon, a swimming instructor who reluctantly becomes involved in Bilal's attempt to cross the English Channel. The narrative highlights themes of migration, solidarity, personal transformation, and moral responsibility.

Excerpts Used:

- [27:14 – 29:53]
- [36:12 – 42:20]
- [1:13:00 – 1:15:12]
- [1:38:40 – 1:42:20]

Appendix B

Reading Text Used in the Initial Reflection Stage

Title: *Doctors Without Borders: Refugees Trapped in Greece Suffering from Depression, Insomnia, Mental Health Issues*

Source: Greek Reporter (2016)

URL: <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2016/11/12/doctors-without-borders-refugees-trapped-in-greece-suffering-from-depression-insomnia-mental-health-issues/>

Purpose in the Study:

This article was used as an introductory reading to help students become aware of the psychological challenges faced by refugees living in Greek camps. It served as the stimulus for the initial reflection question: “*How do refugees impact the lives of local populations?*”

Doctors Without Borders: Refugees Trapped in Greece Suffering from Depression, Insomnia, Mental Health Issues

Recent reports reveal that refugees stuck in migrant reception camps across Greece are increasingly suffering from symptoms of mental illness. According a report released by the international aid group Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) called Greece in 2016: Vulnerable People Left Behind, refugees suffer from a range of conditions from headaches and insomnia to depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychosomatic issues due to the conditions in which they are being forced to live.

“Sleeping disorders, a loss of appetite, an inability to concentrate and depression-related reactions are just a few of the symptoms that refugees display,” reports Christina Sideri, a Medecins Sans Frontieres psychologist in Malakasa.

The different symptoms of mental health issues individuals experience are also linked to their hardships and fleeing their homes as well as the conditions in which they lived under in their countries where they experienced war, famine, as well as mental and physical stress and abuse. Authorities report that there are currently over 60,000 refugees stuck in Greece waiting to have their asylum cases approved since FYROM and other EU nations closed their borders to migrants last spring.

The migrant reception camps in Greece are overcrowded and living arrangements have been condemned by many NPOs, including Medecins Sans Frontieres, as “appalling conditions.” In recent months the Greek government has made efforts to start constructing new dwellings to relocate refugees.

Appendix C

Analytical Description of the Six-Stage Arts-Integrated Framework

This appendix provides a detailed description of the instructional framework, session timing, learning tasks, and assessment artifacts used in the intervention. The framework is grounded in the Critical and Creative Learning through Aesthetic Experience model and informed by Project Zero’s Visible Thinking routines.

Stage 1: Initial Reflection

Duration: 30 minutes
Mode: Individual, written
Materials: Journalistic text on refugees' mental health in Greece

Task **Description:**
Students read a short informational text addressing the psychological challenges faced by refugees living in reception camps. Following the reading, they responded in writing to the prompt:

"How do refugees impact the lives of local populations?"

The text intentionally foregrounded refugees' experiences without addressing host-community perspectives, allowing students' pre-existing assumptions to emerge naturally.

Assessment Artifacts:

- Individual written reflections (baseline data)

Purpose:

To elicit students' initial perceptions, beliefs, and evaluative language related to refugees.

Stage 2: Engagement with Artistic Stimuli

Duration: 20 minutes per stimulus
Mode: Whole-class, guided viewing

Materials:

- Photograph (*Immigrants from Algeria*, van Manen)
- Sculptural artwork (*Childhood*, Katanani)
- Selected film excerpts (*Welcome*, Lioret)

Task **Description:**
Each artistic stimulus was introduced separately without contextual or biographical information. Students were instructed to attend closely to visual and narrative elements.

Assessment Artifacts:

- Observation notes
- Initial oral responses

Purpose:

To create conditions for aesthetic engagement and emotional resonance prior to interpretation.

Stage 3: Observation (Visible Thinking: "See")

Duration: 15–20 minutes per stimulus
Mode: Individual → group discussion

Task **Description:**
Students were asked to describe **only what they could see or hear**, avoiding interpretation. Typical prompts included:

- *What do you notice?*
- *What elements stand out?*
- *What details seem important?*

Teacher intervention was limited to encouraging precision and elaboration.

Assessment Artifacts:

- Student observation lists
- Teacher field notes

Purpose:

To cultivate careful attention, descriptive language, and evidence-based thinking.

Stage 4: Question Formulation (Visible Thinking: “Think / Wonder”)

Duration: 20 minutes

Mode: Small groups

Task

Description:

Based on their observations, students generated open-ended questions. These were first shared within groups and then negotiated at class level to identify central guiding questions.

Assessment Artifacts:

- Student-generated questions (written and oral)

Purpose:

To shift epistemic authority toward learners and encourage inquiry-driven interpretation.

Stage 5: Interpretation and Connection to Critical Questions

Duration: 30–40 minutes

Mode: Whole-class dialogic discussion

Task

Description:

Students proposed interpretations, symbolic meanings, and narratives. They were encouraged to use speculative language (e.g., *might*, *could*, *seems to suggest*) and to connect interpretations to two critical questions:

1. *How can local populations recognize refugees' suffering without prejudice?*
2. *How might refugees contribute positively to host societies?*

Assessment Artifacts:

- Recorded interpretive statements
- Teacher analytic memos

Purpose:

To support perspective transformation, empathetic reasoning, and extended EFL discourse.

Stage 6: Final Reflection (Post-Intervention Assessment)

Duration: 30 minutes

Mode: Individual, written

Task

Description:

Students revisited the original prompt from Stage 1:

“How do refugees impact the lives of local populations?”

They were encouraged to reflect on whether and how their thinking had changed.

Assessment Artifacts:

- Final written reflections (post data)

Purpose:

To document conceptual, emotional, and linguistic change.

	Focus	Duration	Key artifacts
1	Initial perceptions	30 min.	Initial written texts
2	Aesthetic engagement	60 min total	Observation notes
3	Observation	45 min	Descriptive language
4	Questioning	20 min	Student questions
5	Interpretation	40 min	Interpretive discourse
6	Reflection	30 min	Final written text