

Fostering Imaginative Thinking and Problem-Solving Competences through Literary Learning. A Creative Writing Classroom Project

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the potential of creative writing tasks in English language education to foster imaginative thinking and problem-solving competences among young learners. Drawing on a small-scale classroom project conducted in a Year 6 English class, we examine how an engagement with fictional scenarios can simultaneously stimulate learners' creativity and promote foreign language use when they are confronted with story-based challenges. Informed by theoretical concepts such as counterfactual reasoning, we argue that imaginative tasks enable learners to explore alternative realities while also deepening their understanding of real-world structures. By outlining the project's design, implementation, outcomes, and challenges, we aim to shed light on the intersection of literary learning, teaching for creativity, and collaborative problem-solving. Finally, we propose design principles for creative writing tasks, addressing meaningful task constraints, process-oriented steps to deliberately foster creative reasoning, and literary-pedagogical considerations, such as calibrating the degree of fictionality or selecting genre-specific characteristics for learners' creative products.

Keywords: ELT, creative writing, imaginative thinking, problem-solving, teacher education

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Introduction

Engaging young learners with fictional texts in English language teaching (ELT) can serve a variety of purposes – some closely tied to language development, such as expanding learners' lexical repertoire, while others relate to broader educational aims and literary learning goals (Delanoy, 2018; Hall, 2016). Determining the relationship and appropriate balance between competence-oriented learning goals and the contribution of language teaching to the personal development of children and young adults in the sense of *Bildung* thus becomes a central task in instructional planning and reflection (Hallet, 2019). *Bildung* refers to a concept of education that emphasizes aspects such as autonomy, subjectivity, and responsibility – and it aims to foster personal growth, the development of reflective capabilities as well as orientation in one's lifeworld. Such aims are often described as the overarching goal of language education, transcending the mere fostering of specific skills or competences. Pursuing educational goals through literary learning should, however, not remain a vague or abstract ambition. While educational processes may resist standardization (Bonnet & Breidbach, 2013), they still require deliberate initiation – ideally beginning at an early stage.

This article draws on a classroom project conducted with Year 6 learners (aged 11–12). It seeks to illustrate the potential of creative writing tasks to foster imaginative thinking and problem-solving competences, while encouraging meaningful interaction in the foreign language through an engagement with fictional scenarios. The small-scale project, developed within a university-based teacher education seminar, aims to shed light on language-specific as well as language-independent processes involved when learners interact with storyworlds – understood as 'mentally and emotionally projected environments' (Herman, 2010, p. 570) – that require them to devise creative solutions to set challenges.

This project was conceptualized in the context of a university seminar titled *Creativity and Play in Language Education*, as part of an English language teacher education programme in Germany. The course was designed to explore various creative approaches in English language education, focusing particularly on integrating drama (Anderson & Roche, 2015; Bryer, Pitfield & Coles, 2023; Fleming, 2016; Lütge & von Blanckenburg, 2021; Schewe, 2013), educational games (Reinhardt, 2019; Jones, 2022; Stannard, 2022), and creative writing (Harper, 2016; Pipes, 2023) into language teaching practice. While the focus of the course was not exclusively or primarily on

literary learning, the engagement with literary texts and tasks played a role in all of the above-mentioned areas and particularly in the project described here.

A key component of the course was the design, implementation, observation, and subsequent presentation of a 45-minute teaching unit. Teacher trainees were tasked with creating a lesson that incorporated at least one out of the three focal areas: drama, learning games, or creative writing. They were connected to teachers at different partner schools of their university, tailored their planning to a concrete class and were then given the opportunity to teach the lesson in groups and systematically observe the implementation of their lesson plan. Back at university, the teacher trainees presented their work to their peers, which included a reflection on their teaching experience as well as a seminar discussion on potential implications. This process aimed at facilitating a deeper understanding of the creative strategies employed, while also fostering a collaborative environment where student teachers could provide and receive constructive feedback. The goal was to stimulate creativity among participants and identify potential challenges to ultimately enhance their ability to effectively integrate creative and playful tasks into their future teaching. The project presented in this article encompassed a literary learning scenario in which young learners engaged in a creative writing task focusing on imaginative thinking and problem-solving.

When Language Learning Challenges Come with Capes and Superpowers: Theoretical Foundations and Pedagogical Rationale of the Project

The central idea of this project was for language learners to create their own alter ego in the form of a superhero and solve a challenge in groups, using their chosen superpowers and superhero names. In this scenario, the school students took on the role of pupils at a School for Young Superheroes and needed to come up with effective ideas to protect the world from imminent (yet age-appropriate) danger. The school students' proposed solutions for their assigned challenges were written out as fictional action plans and presented to the class to showcase the results of the creative writing process. As such, this product-oriented task has a strong literary component since it requires students to immerse themselves into and act within a storyworld.

While creative writing can take many forms, this particular endeavour singled out two dimensions. First, a common thread in creative writing task formats is to aim at sparking learners' imagination (Maley, 2015). Therefore, within learning processes as well as in the product a certain

degree of originality and inventiveness are to be displayed. This is in turn grounded in the ability to envision something that does not exist while responding to a task at hand. Creativity and imagination are therefore plausibly linked to divergent thinking (Kekang, 2017; Maley, 2015), given that this term describes a mode of meaning making which transcends cognitive schemata routinely or habitually activated by individuals.

In the context of ELT, fostering imaginative thinking comes with certain prerequisites and requires particular methodological considerations. As Read (2015) argues, for young learners to think and act creatively, context is needed. In this case, the fictional world created through a number of scenarios served as a stimulus for imaginative thinking (see examples below). Building on the notion that 'content can be intrinsically creative' (Maley & Kiss, 2018, p. 125), the setting of a school for superheroes was to offer both helpful thematic guidelines and a sufficient level of openness for learners, enhanced by the story context and task instructions. The degree of fictionality, as one key parameter of creative writing tasks (Sara & Elis, 2017), was deliberately made rather high, thus allowing learners to play freely with ideas, for example considering the characters' superpowers and the tools they had at their disposal. This task design is in line with the observation that 'fictitious situations prompt our creative thinking by letting us imagine different possible worlds in which some features do not have to be the same as in the actual world' (Chylińska, 2017, p. 246). Therefore, learners still needed to apply some world knowledge and reflect on what may or may not be possible to ultimately contribute to a coherent fictional world and story, but as long as they responded to the given scenario, they were allowed to alter any rules and mechanisms of their narrative situation. The cognitive processes at play in the context of this task relate to what Weisberg and Gopnik describe as counterfactual reasoning:

Both young children and adults possess the extraordinary ability to imagine events and entities that they know full well are not real. We have argued that this ability exists because it bolsters children's counterfactual reasoning abilities. In turn, counterfactual reasoning plays an important role in how children learn about the world around them. Reasoning counterfactually is a key component in both planning and learning as children create and weigh possible causal models of the world. When learning, children consider alternative ways that the world could be; when planning, they consider

alternative ways they could make the world be. In both cases, generating potential evidence patterns from counterfactual premises is crucial. Pretend play, because it engages the same set of cognitive abilities, provides valuable practice at doing precisely this sort of difficult mental task. (Weisberg & Gopnik, 2013, p. 1377)

That is, by engaging in imagination and conceiving ideas that are not real or realistic, learners activate schemata about the world they live in and deliberately modify these to create new modalities and causalities, which allow them to address a question, entertain a thought, or work towards a desirable solution of a problem. Generally, the functions and purposes of such imaginative and counterfactual reasoning may be manifold and range from (self-)entertainment, aesthetic expression to the development of concrete plans or visions for the future.

The second key dimension in this creative writing project is to foster problem-solving competences. In line with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), problem-solving is primarily seen as a collaborative competence and can be defined as

the capacity of an individual to effectively engage in a process whereby two or more agents attempt to solve a problem by sharing the understanding and effort required to come to a solution and pooling their knowledge, skills and efforts to reach that solution (OECD, 2017, p. 32)

Problem-solving competences arguably require

- knowledge of a specific context, situation, and topical field,
- particular skills to address a task at hand,
- a set of affective, volitional, and attitudinal factors, including a sense of agency, a willingness to challenge the status quo, a belief in one's self-efficacy, and a readiness to act jointly towards a solution.

In order to solve a problem, one first has to identify a need for action. To initiate a problem-solving process, a situation, therefore, has to be assessed as unsettling and uncertain, as Combe and Gebhard (2012) state, basing their argument on Dewey. In this project, this was realized by conjuring up an apocalyptic vision, requiring the intervention of individuals with (self-awarded) extraordinary powers. In this sense, the fictional world provides a literary learning context in which

learners have to come up with a storyline as a reaction to an unsettling narrative situation and develop it further towards a positive ending. As such, the link between creativity, problem-solving and literary imagination becomes obvious: By developing and discussing possible solutions to the narrative stimuli, learners act collaboratively in a creative situation that demands finding and formulating a pathway leading them out of danger. To be successful, they have to come up with specific action steps and experiment with potentially unusual connections to develop a solution (Maley, 2015; Stepanek, 2015). These processes are analogous to forms of pretend play where children act creatively to produce ‘outcomes that are both novel and valuable’ (Chylińska & Gut, 2020, p. 549) by generating, testing, and selecting ideas that are in ‘accordance with a certain playframe’ (Chylińska & Gut, 2020, p. 552). Consequently, such a task is closely linked to (foreign) language use as it produces communicative incentives and requires learners to engage in argumentative discourse: Language is therefore understood as ‘a means by which new ideas are constructed, and past and existing ideas are transformed’ (Tin, 2016, p. 436).

Implementation of the Classroom Project

The 90-minute lesson entitled ‘School for Young Superheroes’ was designed for and held in a Year 6 English language class with 23 learners at a German *Realschule*, a type of secondary school. At the end of the school year, learners at a *Realschule* shall reach the CEFR level A1+ (ISB, 2025a). As a warm-up activity, the students were asked to talk about their favourite superheroes and superpowers to activate prior knowledge and introduce the lesson topic. In preparation for the creative writing task, each student received a worksheet consisting of two parts. The first was identical for everyone, while the second contained different symbols in the top right-hand corner of the sheet. For the first part of the task, the students replied to an invitation to the school for young superheroes by writing a short text (see Figure 1). This guided writing activity already aimed at engaging students in low-threshold imaginative reasoning and at stimulating their curiosity about the following parts of the lesson. In addition, they were to enter the storyworld and reflect on a fictitious reality in which school life may take a very different shape compared to their own.



WELCOME TO THE SCHOOL FOR YOUNG SUPERHEROES

Dear Mr./ Ms. _____

We are happy to inform you that you have everything a real superhero needs. You have been accepted into the secret school for superheroes. Congratulations!

Please send us a short letter (about half a page) with the following information:

- Your real name and your superhero name
- Your age
- Your superpower
- Three things you want to learn at our school

Figure 1. Worksheet: School for Young Superheroes (first part)

For the second and main part of the creative writing task, students had to get together in five groups according to the symbol on their worksheet. Each of the groups received a different scenario, all of them creating a story frame in which villains are trying to gain control over planet Earth. The students then had to think about how to use their superpowers to fight the evil forces and save the world. The scenarios ranged from giant spiders from outer space threatening humanity to time-traveling pirates, to mischievous guinea pigs trying to overpower humanity by turning humans into their own species (see Figure 2). Pupils were asked to read the instructions with their group and brainstorm first ideas on how the world may be saved. To do so, they had to consider everyone's superpower. Through this task design, problem-solving competences were addressed in a collaborative setting in line with the above-mentioned OECD definition. In terms of creative writing, the joint construction of a text lay at the heart of this activity. The learners' texts could be playful and original and yet should display coherence and logical reasoning in light of the rules and mechanics of the narrative world, which was, in turn, partly co-created through the learners' own writing.

When you are finished, please find your superhero friends – they have the same symbol on their letter as you. Get together and solve the following problem:

The guinea pigs all over the world are attacking humans! They are building tunnels everywhere and have created a weapon that turns humans into guinea pigs! You cannot see them coming because they are using their tunnels to appear out of nowhere! The only things we know about them are that they are resistant to smoke and eat a lot of carrots! Also, it seems that they do not like dogs and cats! Write a short text about HOW YOU WILL SAVE THE WORLD (use at least two sentences in the *will*-future) below the description of yourself, together with your superhero friends.

Please present your plan to save the world to the other superheroes so that we can all work together.

Thank you and good luck!

Sincerely,

SCHOOL FOR YOUNG SUPERHEROES

Figure 2. Worksheet: School for Young Superheroes (second part)

The creative text was limited to about half a page and included a form focus as learners were asked to use the will-future, which had been introduced recently. Overall, this task was predominantly meaning-focused, which is why the use of, for example, mentor texts for creative writing (Bland, 2023) was not opted for – although this might have been a viable approach, had a stronger focus been placed on the stylistic or narrative quality of the learner products. After the writing phase, all groups read out their scenarios and showcased their plans to solve the problem in an oral presentation. The results and task itself were subsequently discussed in a closing reflection.

The lesson design aimed to address competence-oriented learning goals across multiple areas in an integrated manner (Keller & Williams, 2020), all of which are grounded in the curriculum for Year 6 at the German *Realschule* (ISB, 2025b):

- The first area concerns receptive competences: Students are expected to understand narrative texts, descriptions, or reports and apply different reading techniques, such as reading for gist, reading for detail, skimming, and scanning. In this project, reading comprehension – particularly reading for detail – was essential, as students had to incorporate all the given information provided in the scenario into their action plan.
- Second, the curriculum emphasizes that learners should experience joy in engaging with texts and creatively apply aesthetic means of expression, for example by producing simple texts of their own (ISB, 2025b). Given that learning goals are often framed primarily in cognitive terms, the approach described here can be seen as a positive example of a more holistic approach to text work in ELT, simultaneously acknowledging and stressing the relevance of literary engagement. In this sense, creative writing consciously addresses motivational and affective dimensions, reflecting an image of learners as individuals who experience pleasure and self-efficacy in the process of text production. This goal was addressed here through a product- and learner-oriented approach that enables students to develop their own ideas and choose problem-solving strategies independently, resulting in a final product that was not pre-defined (Tin, 2016).
- Third, learners should be able to report or narrate activities, experiences, or future plans. This aspect of oral competences was addressed in the presentation and discussion phase following the writing task. While the primary focus of the project lay on imaginative thinking and problem-solving within the creative writing activity, the subsequent presentation phase highlighted the importance of communicating creative ideas in a convincing way to engage an audience and create resonance.

Reflections from the Teacher Trainees

After the lesson, the teacher trainees discussed their planning and implementation with the regular class teacher, who had observed the 90-minute session from the back of the room, and documented key points from this conversation. In addition, they reflected on their lesson experience by documenting their individual impressions and observations, taking into account the following perspectives:

1. Teacher perspective: How would you describe your experience in planning and carrying out the classroom project?
2. Student perspective: How would you assess learners' participation, engagement, and the achievement of the lesson's learning goals?

Selected insights from this process of reflective practice (Mann & Walsh, 2017) are summarized below. They lead up to a broader theoretical reflection, resulting in tentative implications for designing creative writing tasks and for integrating playful and imaginative activities into regular language lessons.

Teacher perspective: Overall, the teacher trainees evaluated this classroom project as a very positive and fruitful experience. Although they had limited knowledge of the class before delivering the lesson, they felt confident and competent to engage learners in this creative scenario and described the implementation of the lesson as generally enjoyable. They highlighted that their time management proved to be successful – although they had anticipated potential issues since the task design was rather open and they had to rely on students' capabilities to work in a creative, collaborative, self-organized manner.

Student perspective: The level of student participation and engagement was evaluated as high by the teacher trainees and interpreted as a result of a motivating task and a positive learning atmosphere. The learners' products demonstrated both originality and accurate language use, which was confirmed by the class teacher, who described the school students' action plans as particularly creative and emphasized the added value of setting aside the standard coursebook for this lesson. In addition, it is noteworthy that students created drawings to illustrate their problem-solving strategies, thereby autonomously engaging in multimodal meaning making as part of the task. The learners also reported that they preferred the collaborative setting over working individually, although the teacher trainees found it challenging at times to ensure equal participation in the creative writing process. Nevertheless, during the initial phase, the students would have benefitted from more support, particularly in naming their characters and finding them a superpower. This suggests that some students may need more structured guidance to enter the fictional world, activate their resources, and brainstorm effectively. Once they had developed and adopted a superhero character and personality, however, this role appeared to grant them both a high degree

of creative freedom and a sense of role protection in the manner of being able to hide oneself behind the chosen superhero role. This observation is in line with empirical findings, which indicate that immersing oneself into a role can lower foreign language anxiety (Wirag & Surkamp, 2022).

Design Principles for Creative Writing Tasks

This classroom project serves as a springboard for reflecting on broader questions concerning the role of creative and literary learning scenarios in English language teaching. In this context, fostering creative expression in the foreign language is regarded not merely as the development of a useful skill but, more broadly, as an educational goal in its own right (Fasko & Rizza, 2019; Li, 2020; Rössler, 2008). Importantly, this view does not contradict the claim that ‘creativity, as the process of producing new ideas, contribute[s] to second-language learning – in particular, the emergence of rich, complex language’ (Tin, 2016, p. 435). On the contrary, it can be argued that educational processes become manifest precisely within such rich and complex language. For example, it may be the case that when developing action strategies in a fictional scenario, learners need to negotiate different points of view, reflect on the desired and undesired consequences of their proposals, and work towards consensus or compromise. Therefore, both imaginative as well as individual-reflective dimensions can be regarded as equally significant components of the creative process, which are to be articulated in the foreign language within a collaborative setting.

To make this possible, certain prerequisites and planning principles are essential. The following three categories each offer a heuristic framework with analytical criteria and parameters that language teachers can adjust to design and scale creative activities for young learners. These design principles are based on both scholarship and the described classroom project. While the empirical data from this small-scale, exploratory project are necessarily limited, the trainees’ experiences and observations were discussed with an experienced English teacher, a university lecturer and within a seminar of student teachers, and they were interpreted in relation to theoretical concepts and teaching approaches. This combination of literature review, written documentation, collaborative discussion, and theory-oriented interpretation forms the basis for the tentative principles presented below.

Principle 1: Adjusting task openness

Fostering learners' individual imaginative capabilities and problem-solving competences fundamentally requires activities that encourage exploration, hypothesis testing, and playful engagement with words and narrative structures in the foreign language. In this context, task openness emerges as a key requirement, as Tin (2016, p. 445) notes: 'The final meaning to be constructed should not be predictable a priori. To facilitate this, tasks need to be ill-defined rather than well-defined.' However, there is merit in viewing openness as an adjustable rather than a fixed variable when it comes to creative and literary learning. This becomes particularly evident when considering students' individual proficiency levels and their respective needs for support. Especially with young learners, the ability to generate creative ideas often hinges on the provision of scaffolding – whether through thematic or language support, or more restrictive task instructions. These may, as a matter of fact, promote creativity:

[C]onstraints are not necessarily detrimental to creative performance. Indeed, they define the 'box' to work in, but, at the same time, they drive the reasoner towards various possible exits, some of which are particularly creative. Leaving a wider, more open space to work in does not necessarily help the reasoner to see the best direction to take. (Bianchi & Branchini, 2023, p. 4)

Consequently, it is a teacher's responsibility to decide how open or pre-structured a creative learning scenario should be – through the design of the task context, the clarity of instructions, or the specification of a desirable product or outcome. One way to adjust the degree of openness in creativity-based tasks is by introducing content-related constraints or guidelines. In a literary learning context where students engage with a storyworld and its plot, this may involve filling literary gaps in order to create a more differentiated and elaborate fictional universe. In the classroom project, this was achieved by adding details on how, for example, the guinea pigs behave in the storyworld. For learners who require more scaffolding, such descriptions could be expanded by the teacher, or a preparatory phase could be introduced in which students collaboratively sketch out the fictional setting in greater detail before proceeding to write their own action plan for overcoming the given challenge. This would be a way of incorporating counterfactual elements

into a scenario, which can facilitate creative performance (Chylińska, 2017; Markman, Lindberg, & Galinsky, 2007).

In addition to content-based guidelines, providing learners with strategic advice on how to generate innovative solutions to a problem can serve as another form of scaffolding. The following suggestions build on Chylińska's (2017) concept of breaking imaginative rules, and adapt this to the context of creative writing in ELT:

- **Dream big:** You can make substantial changes to reality – even the laws of nature may be altered if it serves your story.
- **Look beyond the obvious:** Don't stop at your first idea. Take time to explore and gather inspiration – through brainstorming and researching unusual places, objects, characters, or events.
- **Reflect on consequences:** Think about what follows from your creative choices. If your character can, for example, travel through time, how might this affect their personality, their relationships to other characters, and ultimately the storyline?
- **Paint the details:** When you come up with a good but vague idea, think it through carefully. Add details to make your vision more vivid and believable.
- **Explore the unexpected:** What could be an interesting plot twist in your scenario? Think about how surprising elements might help you tell a compelling and original story.

Depending on a specific creative writing task, these guidelines may need to be adapted in terms of language and content to effectively support learners in producing texts that are both creative and coherent. The openness of a task is therefore initially defined through task instructions and subsequently shaped by how learners understand and implement them. As Beghetto (2019, p. 59) argues, 'students who are willing to provide creative responses need to learn how and when to balance originality with meeting task constraints in the particular classroom setting.' To develop this competence, it may be necessary to approach creative writing as a process-oriented endeavour – as will be outlined below.

Principle 2: Process-orientation

The ability to generate creative ideas as effective responses to a given problem tends to involve a multi-step process aimed at achieving a desirable outcome. The guideline in the previous section, which encourages learners to go beyond their initial ideas, is backed up by research on the serial order effect, stating that ‘reasoners need to shift their focus away from any easily accessible ideas [...] and direct their search towards representations that are not default’ (Bianchi & Branchini, 2023, p. 3). In light of this, it seems advisable to consider process-oriented approaches to fostering literary engagement, imaginative thinking and problem-solving in order to systematically guide learners in generating and evaluating potential solutions to a fictional task scenario. Generally, process-orientation stresses autonomous and exploratory learning coupled with a mistake-friendly mindset of both teachers and learners, and likewise acknowledges the necessity of receiving feedback on preliminary results and learning outcomes (Kirchhoff, 2018).

In addition to the content-based guidelines outlined above, a clear sequence of task steps can provide meaningful structure for creative writing activities involving fictional scenarios in the ELT classroom. In retrospect, the classroom project described in this article may also have benefitted from a more fine-grained sequencing of task steps, which, however, needs to be balanced with the given time frame. In the following, we suggest a general framework of task steps that can be adapted to various types of creative writing tasks. As such, this sequence is intended as a heuristic starting point and scaffold for teachers, requiring further specification and adaptation in light of the particular task at hand.

Suggestions for structuring the process of creative writing:

- **Understanding the task:** Learners should fully grasp what the task requires and what the expected or possible outcomes might be. Paraphrasing the instructions and discussing genre-specific questions with the class can support comprehension. When transforming a task such as the one described in this project into a storytelling activity, it may be beneficial to work with model or mentor texts and to follow a teaching-learning cycle (Bland, 2023; Sara & Elis, 2017). In this approach, learners first engage with an example text that illustrates key features of the genre. These features are then jointly examined and reconstructed before students go on to produce their own texts.

- **Generating initial ideas:** Learners jot down their first ideas without filtering or evaluating them. Visual clustering or mind mapping may help to organize these thoughts.
- **Thinking in new directions:** Learners are encouraged to deliberately explore ideas that differ significantly from their initial ones – even those that might seem implausible or unusual at first.
- **Reviewing and selecting ideas:** In pairs, learners browse through their material and identify the most promising directions to pursue further.
- **Researching and expanding:** Learners look for additional materials – created by others or generated via AI tools, such as visualizations – that could enrich or inspire their work. They then select what is most relevant for their purposes.
- **Drafting:** Learners choose their strongest ideas, refine and combine them as needed, and develop a coherent first draft with sufficient detail.
- **Giving and receiving feedback:** Learners exchange drafts and give each other feedback. This phase benefits from structured reflection prompts that focus on imagination, originality, and problem-solving quality.
- **Revising the draft:** Based on the feedback received, learners revise their text – enhancing strengths and addressing potential weaknesses. These last two phases may be iterated as needed.
- **Presenting the final product:** Learners share their finished work with the group. This can be accompanied by initially collecting reading /viewing impressions and /or short explanations of key creative decisions.
- **Reflecting on the process:** The class discusses which steps were perceived as easy or difficult, shares individual insights, and reflects on what was learned throughout the creative writing process.

Such a sequence of task steps builds on the premise that if imaginative thinking and problem-solving are to take centre-stage, these cognitive processes need to be systematically supported and

consciously fostered throughout the task. In addition, it is crucial to provide learners with opportunities to showcase their products and to reflect on and appreciate what they have created. Knowing that their output is valued – and that there is room for continuous improvement of their writing – can help reduce the creative risks that often hinder personal expression in a classroom setting.

Principle 3: Orientation towards literary learning

In this project, learners enter a storyworld, in which they are not merely respondents to a literary text written by a professional author, but writers and problem solvers in their own right. Literary writing is thus understood as a 'participatory practice' (Becker & Matz, 2023, p. 99) that connects with learners' lifeworlds. The action plan developed in this project can be considered a form of short narrative fiction, allowing learners to produce a coherent fictional text (Genetsch 2019, p. 6), which in this case is naturally limited in complexity and literary elaboration. However, a stronger focus on literary learning and storytelling could be achieved by addressing the following dimensions. These are again a conceptual suggestion and present a range of parameters that may be adapted by teachers to strengthen the dimension of literary engagement within a creative writing task.

- **Degree of fictionality:** Teachers can influence the extent to which the narrative is anchored in reality through task design. For example, one might make only minimal changes to the real-world setting (for example, 'The world is as we know it, but every person has one extraordinarily heightened sense.'), encouraging learners to creatively explore the consequences of such a modification. In contrast, stories set in worlds very different from our own offer greater creative freedom, though they also require more effort to establish a coherent and believable context.
- **Narrative structure of the product:** Teachers can provide guidance on the narrative progression of students' stories, for instance by using an arc of suspense (Exposition – Rising Action – Climax – Falling Action – Resolution) as scaffolding. Alternatively, learners could be given 'event cards' that must be incorporated into the stories (for example, 'Midway through your story, a new character appears who drastically changes the course of action.').

- **Genre of the product:** The action plan described in this project could be extended into a fully developed narrative by assigning a specific genre, such as thriller, musical, or action-comedy. Based on this instruction, learners could sketch out a story or a film idea. If they opt for the latter, they could pitch it to a mock jury of film producers, transforming the task into a monologic speaking activity.
- **Embellishment of the literary world:** Learners might work on character profiles, create detailed descriptions of the story setting, or write a prologue to further develop and specify the fictional world.
- **Quality of the product:** To foster narrative competence, teachers can focus on what makes a compelling story with their class. This may include reflecting on intriguing character constellations and plot dynamics, narrative techniques or vivid and expressive language. In this way, the task can serve as a stepping stone to discuss quality criteria in literary storytelling.

Synthesis and Conclusion

Considering the outlined project and its possible variations, one might ask in what sense a creative writing task can be understood as a form of exemplary learning and as a contribution to the development of transferable competences. In other words, how does acting creatively in a fictional world align with the notion of real-life orientation in communicative language teaching, and is it plausible that such activities can foster imaginative thinking and problem-solving competences beyond the specific classroom scenario?

A first step in addressing this question is to recognize that such projects provide opportunities to explore creativity both playfully and explicitly as a phenomenon. Alongside engaging with a fictional scenario, learners should therefore be encouraged to reflect on the processes of generating, shaping, revising, and presenting creative output. This aims at 'helping students learn about creativity so that they recognize the value of it in learning and life' (Beghetto, 2019, p. 593). Literary writing thus serves as a pathway for exploring creative strategies, which should ideally be made explicit by teachers. This, in turn, helps learners to identify and transfer these strategies to other contexts.

A second argument is that even unrealistic, imaginative scenarios can yield benefits for real-life communicative and creative contexts. Considering that ‘counterfactuals modulate emotional experiences’ (Byrne, 2016, p. 139) and can therefore amplify both positive and negative emotions, learners are given a chance to reflect on desirable and undesirable fictional worlds, storylines and endings. Through conscious engagement with an imaginative – completely fictional or pseudo-realistic – setting, students cannot only cognitively understand the idiosyncrasies of the literary world but also experience them in a more holistic sense. Focusing on imagination and its emotional-affective dimensions, therefore, allows students to also gain insight into the mechanics of storytelling, for example regarding necessary narrative elements to create tension and relief for readers.

Moreover, it is through counterfactual thought that one can – seemingly paradoxically – learn about properties and conditions of the actual world. ‘Unrealistic pretend scenarios are useful not because they provide an accurate reflection of the causal structure of reality. [...] Rather, unrealistic scenarios are useful because they highlight the boundaries of the causal space in a way that is easy to grasp’ (Weisberg & Gopnik, 2013, p. 1376 f.). In a fictional creative writing scenario, learners thus create a mental model of a storyworld and explore its internal mechanics, for instance, the possibilities and limitations their characters may face within that world. To do this, they will draw on their knowledge about the reality they live in and about the genre they are producing – and potentially modify both.

The discussion of the classroom project in this article aimed to explore and specify the potential of creative writing tasks in the context of English language education, with particular emphasis on imagination and problem-solving. Especially in collaborative settings, creativity emerges as a social practice (Jones, 2016), both requiring and stimulating learners to interact, exchange ideas and work towards a common goal. To support this, teachers need to foster imagination as ‘the seed of creativity’ (Gotlieb, Hyde, Immordino-Yang, & Kaufman, 2019, p. 709), which calls for multi-step, process-oriented task designs. Such tasks invite learners to experiment with ideas and with the foreign language, enabling them to develop competences in the areas of language and literary learning, while simultaneously engaging in original, divergent thinking to respond to a given challenge.

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