

8 When the reader becomes the writer; creative writing approaches in the foreign language classroom

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Abstract

Using a contemporary short story by the award-winning German writer Roman Ehrlich as a case study, in this paper we will offer ideas for engaging students at CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for languages) B1+ and B2 level in German in reading as well as encouraging them in creative writing tasks through formative assessment and coursework. More specifically, we will argue that literature in the classroom is a means of practising reading comprehension. This opens up opportunities for students to create their own literary texts, with receptive skills becoming productive skills. Introducing two projects we carried out with students in their first and second years at the University of Liverpool as examples, we will discuss process and practice. We will show how reading and writing projects can be linked to aspects of authentic assessment and its forms. We are then going to explore the possibilities for further embedding literary assessments in coursework, highlighting their benefits and challenges, including the process of publishing them on a student-led WordPress site.

Keywords: Roman Ehrlich, creative writing, interactive class participation, student engagement, authentic assessment.

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1. Introduction

In this paper we are going to explore how the stay of a writer in residence can be used as a platform to engage students in developing core language skills; in reading, analysing, listening, speaking, interpreting, mastering advanced grammar and, just as importantly, writing. We will also explore how to make use of residencies, so they continue to have an impact *after* an author's visit.

Reading and translating literary texts stand among the oldest approaches to learning languages. Across millennia, initiates have had to read exemplary texts and translate them from, *inter alia*, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, etc. into their own tongue. Considered old-fashioned by the mid-twentieth century, contemporary pedagogies have emphasised production rather than reception within a communicative rather than textual paradigm. In recent years, we are witnessing a return to literary texts as attractive and authentic additions to communicative pedagogies at our institutions, see e.g. [Di Martino and Di Sabato \(2014\)](#).

2. Uses of literature in class: translation, poetry, novels

Against the background described in the introduction, we have sought to experiment with literary texts at the University of Liverpool in ways that promote student engagement. For example, we introduce students at B1 and B2 levels to excerpts drawn from German literary texts which are both informative and humorous, such as [Koppensteiner's \(1984\) *Österreich erzählt*](#). Alongside newspaper stories covering current affairs which inform students about political and social issues and introduce them to higher level reading comprehension skills, we also give them extracts from novels from several German-speaking countries. Our aim is to choose texts that encourage our students to read the full book for their oral exams which, in German at Liverpool, are the basis of their assessments in Years 1 and 2 at levels B1 and B2.

However, our pedagogical practice with literature in language learning has gone beyond the above. As part of moving from reception to production and the development of creative writing tasks, we want to emphasise the attractiveness of short stories in particular. Short stories as a genre are easily manageable for most levels of language learner while remaining rewarding to read. Students are also offered choice with an option of short stories from a pool, allowing them to follow their interests. It was in experimenting with short stories in particular that we saw the possibilities offered by a literary residency for extending our teaching and learning practices. In what follows we will describe how we organised the residency before drawing out more general lessons from that experience of relevance to those interested in using literature in the language classroom.

3. Literature-based classroom activities and assessment

In February 2018, the contemporary German author Roman Ehrlich, born in 1983 in Aichach, Bavaria, began a residency at the University of Liverpool and Lancaster University. Financed partly by the Writer in Residence (WiR) programme of the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) and partly by internal university funds as part of a collaboration, Ehrlich stayed in Liverpool for a week and interactively participated in a number of different language and content seminars across all year groups within the German degree programme.

Before the visit, we began to use *Das Gesuch (An Appeal)*³, a 12 page-long short story from Ehrlich's (2014) collection *Urwaldgäste* as the basis for formative and summative assessments as well as classroom activities with students in their first (post A-Level) and second year of studies. Within the story, various storylines chart characters living through various situations which together form a pool of possibilities to capture the students' attention and allow them to engage with the story from multiple perspectives. Those situations included, *inter alia*,

3. We have used the acknowledged but as of yet unpublished translation of 'Das Gesuch' 'An Appeal' by Elke Wardlaw.

a person trying to convince their supervisor to be allowed to change jobs, a former teacher participating in a quiz show, and an IT-engineer borrowing a pornography DVD in a video store. Narratives of this kind are especially suited for classroom work due to the large number of places where readers can fill in gaps in the storyline according to their own understanding. Filling in those gaps allows students to use their imagination while working within the narrative and linguistic scaffold provided by the author.

In addition to introducing this literary material, a number of other steps were taken to prepare the students for the author's visit. Over the Christmas break, the students of Year 1 (B1) read the entire short story and, upon their return, worked in class in groups of four to develop a deeper textual understanding as well as to identify the different primary plotlines within the story. The five main plotlines featured in Ehrlich's (2014) short story were formally separated rather than interwoven. Following that, every student chose a character they were intrigued by and new groups were formed based on their decisions in order to carry out a language analysis of the character's own story, a means, which, according to Hall (2016), supports the language learning process. As the storylines were neither action-laden nor fast-paced and the characters often focused on being in the moment, the tutor chose to practise a more mindful approach to gain a deeper appreciation of the text. The results of the analyses were presented by the students to the rest of the seminar-group.

In the course of Ehrlich's visit, the students' analyses were complemented by a meet-the-author Q&A session where the students were given the opportunity to ask questions based on their analyses. The following year we ran the same project again. While the author was not present, the students were still encouraged to think about the questions they would ask him and then to come up with likely answers for themselves.

Based on all the information collected, students then chose a character they wanted to focus on for a 500-word assignment. For this written assessment, the students had to write either a prequel or sequel to their favourite character's storyline in a first-person perspective. The students were encouraged to write

creatively; however, they were also reassured that less creativity would not lead to a lower mark, as a creative element can sometimes cause worry in this regard. The mark for the assignment was based predominantly on the command of language they demonstrated in terms of range, accuracy, and style, as well as coherence.

For the second year cohort (B2), a very specific gap in the storyline of one of the characters was picked for the students to fill: a woman participating in a TV quiz show asked during her appearance why she no longer wanted to be a teacher. In her answer to this question she refers to a dream she has had, but she does not give any further information, either to the audience in the text or to the reader. The formative assessment based on the teacher “Frau S. aus P.’s” tale asked students to write 150-200 words narrating the dream’s content.

Students responded to both tasks very creatively and they led to a generally high level of engagement with Ehrlich’s story as a piece of contemporary German literature. The coursework produced during these experiments with literature was also of a high standard and was enjoyed by participating students as highlighted in the end in the module evaluation questionnaires. Our experiences suggest, therefore, that literary residencies can be highly effective indeed.

4. Lessons drawn: didactics of a literary residency

Based on our experiences, we suggest the following steps to make best use of a literary residency.

First, work by visiting authors should be introduced *before* they arrive via texts whose length can be adjusted according to learning level as part of reading comprehension. This involves different reading tasks: global comprehension, i.e. overall structure and meaning; analysis of language use and style; unusual vocabulary/use of words from specific regions; punctuation; longer or shorter sentences vis-à-vis rhythm and speed; and choice of genre. Translating a text requires comprehension of exact detail as well as its cultural and

country-specific features. Given this, translation and its challenges prepare the students for an author's visit.

Second, once students have a thorough grasp of the text, they should prepare questions to discuss in person with the author *during* their residency. Discussion topics can cover biographical questions as a lead up to more textually oriented questions about the work and its production and meaning. Students can demonstrate specific knowledge of the texts by asking detailed questions about certain characters their classroom work has focused on. To avoid silence when the author actually visits, these questions should be well-prepared and ready to hand. Meet-the-author Q&A sessions constitute authentic speaking and listening situations involving engagement with the author's answers in real-time which incorporates a contextualised perspective of real readers (see [Swann & Allington, 2009](#)).

Finally, *post-residency*, students can be asked to write blogs about the author's visit in English for their university, interview fellow students on what they liked best about the texts and the experience of meeting the author, and engage further with the author's texts by writing online reviews on public or internal university platforms. At the University of Liverpool, final year students in German created a WordPress site called *Der Hammer* which allowed for wider impact and accessibility.

5. Conclusion

There are many ways of using literature in the classroom, such as translating extracts from novels, reading poetry aloud, and reading novels for an oral exam. We have mentioned only a few options here, concentrating on literary residencies in particular. As we have shown, literary residencies, as authentic teaching and learning situations, stimulate more engagement with the subject in general over several weeks from the preparation of the visit, to live Q&As, to the post-preparation of writing a blog and assessed coursework in final exams. We cannot, therefore, recommend them highly enough. Admittedly, an author's

visit is a special occasion, but with modern technology, visits can be virtual as well as physical through live chats or video calls. The projects can be expanded by liaison interpreting – live or via video-call – to subtitling an existing video about an author or by creating a short film about an author and his or her work. The options are endless, and we would encourage those involved in language teaching to explore them for themselves.

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