

# Making a Case for Poetry in Action-oriented Foreign Language Courses

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*The present article describes a small-scale poetry project intended to foster culturally responsive learning in the C1-level university language course. The instructor of this course had the opportunity to invite an aspiring poet, Ivan Bio from Sierra Leone, to a reading of three of his poems to be performed during one of the sessions. Designed as an extension activity for one of the course units, the project required students to complete a set of tasks to prepare for the poetry reading as well as engage in follow-up activities to reflect on the experience.*

*By describing and analyzing the implementation of this reading session, the authors aim to explore the potential benefits of poetic discourse for language courses based on action-oriented, learner-centered approaches.*

*Against the background of the CEFR descriptors relating to the reception of creative/literary language and the mediation of texts, the authors intend to show that the interpretation and analysis of poetic texts can help students not only to increase their sensitivity to and awareness of the ambivalence of language, but also to in turn expand their communicative language competences, most notably their mediation skills.*

*To achieve these goals, students were asked not only to analyze and explain the poems to their peers, but also to formulate personal responses to the texts. A striking observation was that the context of remote learning where students communicated in a Zoom meeting did not seem to interfere with their willingness and ability to express their attitudes and even their emotions. This made the meeting an emotionally profound experience for everybody involved, and the authors will argue that not only the range but also the intensity of the language learning experience can be greatly enhanced by integrating poetry in the foreign language classroom. The article intends to demonstrate that the CEFR with its Companion Volume (CEFR/CV) and their operationalization in action-oriented approaches form a perfect basis for expanding learners' language competences through poetry.*

**Keywords:** poetry reading, culturally responsive teaching and learning, cultural awareness, action-oriented approach, learner-centeredness, mediation, blended learning, remote learning

## 1 Poetry in foreign language courses – General considerations

Foreign language courses at the Language Centers of German universities are, as a rule, designed to enable students to take their language competences in fast progression from one (sub-)level to the next. As these courses are generally based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001) and the levels of competence it describes, the approaches to teaching and learning are strongly focused on the demands and requirements of the learners and aim to continually increase their agency in the foreign language, the objective which is central to the concept of action-oriented language education. In this context, language is used with more or less clear purposes in mind and regarded as a functional medium used to perform actions and achieve goals.

Modern language courses are therefore designed on the basis of constructive alignment, a principle which systematically relates course content as well as form and content of assessment to clearly defined learning outcomes. To what extent these theoretical advances are in fact put into practice may remain an open question; however, those courses which are based on textbooks usually show some degree of constructive alignment in terms of being oriented towards learning outcomes postulated for the respective units in the textbook.

Such learning outcomes are typically described in terms of competences students are intended to acquire over a given period of time. The targeted results are usually quite pragmatic and functional in nature, in accordance with the general view of language learning and its main objectives as promoted by the CEFR (Piccardo and North 2019: 17). This clear focus on the functionality of language and the competence and action orientation of the didactics of foreign languages may be taken to stand in stark contrast to the very nature of aesthetic texts and the idea of using them for the purposes of foreign language learning and teaching (Küster 2015: 15; Neuhofer 2018: 102). However, practice may not always do justice to the underlying theoretical and conceptual considerations. In the action-oriented approach, action is by no means to be considered as synonymous with transaction, and therefore the functionality of language cannot be reduced to its purely transactional uses. Success or failure of any transaction depend to a significant extent on the social interaction between the partners, so that relational aspects may be even more important. This is in line with the socio-constructivist and sociocultural theories underlying the CEFR, which postulate the interrelatedness of the individual and the social dimensions of human undertakings, perhaps most notably those which are part of learning processes (Piccardo and North 2019: 17).

The reading of literary texts has a long tradition as a well-established practice in language classes within the German school system, but now seems to be in need of further legitimization, as Küster (2015: 15-16) points out. In the era of competence orientation, the use of aesthetic texts does, at least as far as policy makers in German education are concerned, raise questions ranging from the general expediency of literature in the context of language teaching and learning to its applicability for purposes of assessment. That this problem is not confined to Germany is reflected by Hanauer's observation that the developments in the field of Applied Linguistics in the late 1990s have challenged the role and the relevance of literary texts for the purposes of language learning (2001: 295). It is therefore not surprising that literature is usually not taken into consideration for foreign language courses in tertiary education.

Two main reasons for this emerge from the findings of recent research:

- Even experts promoting the use of literature in foreign language instruction are of – at least – two minds as to the learning outcomes which can be achieved through reading and analyzing literary texts.
- Instructors are often not convinced that literature in general (or are), more specifically, poetry, can be put to meaningful uses in their classrooms and feel or are ill-equipped to use literary texts for the purpose of teaching foreign languages in terms of training/competences and the availability of appropriate materials (Munden and Skjærstad 2018: 267-271; Hassan 2016: 142).<sup>1</sup> Even though, as Hassan (2016: 137f) points out, an increasing number of theorists have aimed at justifying approaches involving literary texts including poetry, they often do so with the idea of moving away from the teleological and pragmatic orientation of academic language instruction and the idea of measuring language competences by setting tasks directly related to defined learning outcomes (Neuhofer 2016: 102; Küster 2015: 15-16; Carbone Bruna 2019: 39).

1. These two reasons largely conform to the three problems Hahn et al. (2021: 3) have identified for traditional poetry lessons: a low level of self-efficacy of teachers, a low level of student engagement (resulting from the first), and a failure to achieve authentic learning experiences.

This attitude, however, seems to be informed by an unduly restrictive understanding of the term competence. The modern conception of competences as comprising abilities, knowledge, skills, attitudes and values honors the complexity of human personalities and what they are able to do. In communication and the actions it supports, language users draw on their general competences in combination with communicative language competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic) and strategic competences (Piccardo and North 2019: 16f). In order to achieve the intended learning effect, a meta-dimension, the ability to reflect on one's choices and their consequences, needs to complement the individual's set of skills and capabilities (Piccardo and North 2019: 26; North 2020: 549).

The holistic view of the user/learner of languages as a social agent, whose agency is based on a complex interplay of different sets of competences (Piccardo and North 2019: 13), opens a world of possibilities for the implementation of aesthetic texts in language classes. This is recognized by experts such as Steinbrügge (2016: 10), who draws on the findings of language didactics and language acquisition research in claiming that, both on the level of content and on the level of form, literary texts are effective for language acquisition because they appeal to the learner's emotions in very subtle ways and therefore enhance memory performance. This can also be maintained for cognition, as experts such as Merrill Swain (2011: 195-197) have put forth in the wake of Vygotsky's visionary theories. The positive effects literature in general and poetry in particular can not only have on learners' motivation but also on their emotional as well as mental state in the learning process should therefore not be underestimated (Piccardo and North 2019: 79, 84). For the project described here, this appeared all the more significant during the pandemic and the situation of lockdown our students found themselves in.<sup>2</sup>

A further advantage of aesthetic or literary texts is that they allow for in a sense informal and potentially playful approaches to language learning (cf. Küster 2015: 26; Neuhofer 2018: 103; Osthues and Pavlik 2022: 19) which provide students with opportunities to experiment with language while reducing the pressure exerted by the fear of making (grammatical) errors (Piccardo and North 2019: 84). This may help them to expand their range of expression through the use of linguistic devices such as metaphor, imagery and rhyme and improve their enunciation in the foreign language through analyzing and applying rhythm/meter (Munden and Skjærstadt: 2018: 261).

Those researchers focusing on language instruction in the German school system name the aspect of humanistic education and the development of the learner's personality (Steinbrügge 2016: 7; Küster 2015: 16, 18) as speaking in favor of literature in the language classroom. In the case of university language education, aspects of inter- or transcultural competences may appear to be of greater relevance, and there is general agreement among experts that aesthetic/literary texts are a most appropriate medium for developing these (Küster 2015: 18; Neuhofer 2018: 104; Armstrong 2016: 2; Alter 2016: 50). However, as some scholars point out, these aspects of education and ultimately of personality development are closely interconnected and to a certain extent account for the complexity of language acquisition processes (Armstrong 2016: 4; Küster 2015: 27f). A central term in this connection is awareness—of language as well as of cultural specifics (Hanauer 2001: 288; Piccardo and North 2019: 201) – both of which are vital to the understanding and the views of the world a learner develops. Providing opportunities for increasing the awareness of language and the ways in which it carries meaning is preconditional for expanding the learner's ability to interpret, to make inferences and ultimately to think analytically and critically (Armstrong 2016: 2-4; Meliss 1993: 161-162; see also Piccardo et al. 2019: 20). These are the skills activated in the process of meaning construction – a process which reaches the highest level of complexity in the reception and mediation of poetic texts (Hanauer 2001: 318). In language education,

2. In this context, the interdisciplinary project *Pantherzeiten. Ein Buch für die TH Köln* should be mentioned. Our university collaborated on this literature project with the author Marica Bodrožić, who had recently published an essayistic text reflecting her life during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students and staff were encouraged to read this book, the title of which derived from Rilke's famous poem *Der Panther*, and a number of workshops and lectures on poetic language were offered. Several of our colleagues incorporated activities related to this project in their language courses.

this may therefore be the ultimate challenge for both learners and instructors, and it is the latter's responsibility to design tasks and thus create affordances for their students to set the virtuous circle of 'learning by doing' in motion (Piccardo and North 2019: 51, 134f, 191, 280; Piccardo et al. 2019: 22, 25).

In view of the potential benefits of exposing language learners to poetry as outlined above, we consider it worthwhile to subject the CEFR/CV to closer scrutiny in terms of how it describes the skills required for and developed through the appreciation of literary works. In doing so, the authors are well aware that this document, just as the CEFR itself, is to be understood as a heuristic instrument, which provides support and inspiration for educational practice rather than spelling out concrete suggestions or solutions (North 2020: 554-555).

Generally speaking, one could argue that literary language is conspicuously absent from the CEFR and its Companion Volume. As far as language production is concerned, this is justifiably so; it is simply not the purpose of the framework to provide a basis for evaluating the skills required for artistic language production.

But in terms of receptive communication skills the ability of learners to understand aesthetic language uses does not appear to be considered an important aspect of their overall language competences. In places where one might expect a reference to the reception of aesthetic texts, as for example in the descriptors for oral comprehension, Section 'Understanding as a member of a live audience', it is simply ignored, as the descriptors relate to non-aesthetic/non-fictional text types such as discussions, talks, lectures and presentations (COE 2020: 50). Consequently, the comprehension of literary language, for example when learners watch a play performed in a theater or listen to songs or poetry readings, is not explicitly mentioned as a relevant language skill.

The reception of aesthetic texts is only very indirectly hinted at in the section "Understanding audio (or signed) media and recordings", where descriptors for level C1 include references to understanding "non-standard usage" or "implicit attitudes and relationships" (COE 2020: 52) – which may or may not be aesthetic in nature.

The section related most directly to aesthetic texts is the type of audio-visual comprehension described in terms of "Watching TV, film and video", but again, the realm of literary production is not explicitly addressed. The text types and programs mentioned here are advertisements/commercials, news items/reports, interviews, documentaries, talk shows and current affairs programs, with films and plays only to be mentioned in the most general manner. The specifics of language use referred to that may have relevance to the comprehension of aesthetic texts are "slang and idiomatic usage" and "nuances and implied meaning" which are among the descriptors for level C1 (COE 2020: 53).

Conceivably, literary language features more prominently when reading comprehension skills are described. The descriptors for overall reading comprehension (COE 2020: 54) explicitly mention the understanding of literary writings for levels C1 and C2. This section of the CEFR concludes with a table of descriptors for "Reading as a leisure activity", where literary texts in the stricter sense of the term are referred to from level B1. Here even the reception of poetry in terms of understanding "simple poems and song lyrics provided these employ straightforward language and style" (COE 2020: 59) is taken into consideration, but in a manner, it would appear, where the boundaries between reading and listening comprehension are blurred in the reference to song lyrics.

In view of the above, it is most interesting to note that the idea of language learners understanding, responding to, and analyzing creative texts is given more space and significance in the context of mediation activities, namely the mediation of text: "[...] the notion [of mediating a text] has been further developed to include [...] expressing reactions to texts, particularly creative and literary ones." (COE 2020: 91).

The importance of mediation in language learning processes has been extensively discussed by Piccardo and North, who, referring to the role of the different modes of communication in the construction of meaning, claim that "Mediation [...] takes the dynamic nature of meaning making to

another level, by underlining the constant link between the social and individual dimensions in language use and language learning.” (2019: 17, 54). They identify mediation and agency to have key positions in the action-oriented approach, which is reflected in the CEFR descriptive scheme (2019: 17).

In regard to the enormous complexity of mediation activities, which of necessity integrate receptive, productive and interactional skills, they can be considered to be the ideal basis, if not a necessary requirement, of collaborative learning, as North (2020: 554) points out, all the more so since they have a clear focus on the learner as a social agent (Hassel/Hehl 2021: 34). This may perhaps become most obvious in processes of languaging, a term which is closely associated with Merrill Swain (Piccardo and North 2019: 76). North pertinently describes the concept of languaging as “articulating thoughts either to oneself or with the others, and further elaborating these thoughts, so that language becomes both the process and the product, the means and the end.” (2020: 554; see also Piccardo et al. 2019: 18, 24).

In the phenomenology of language, it is poetry which appears most in need of mediation, for how else can the multiplicity of dimensions of meaning which poetic texts may convey be fathomed? The authors of the present text therefore maintain that the introduction of poetry to the language classroom is legitimized by the plethora of opportunities it offers to engage students in a variety of different activities which can be designed to develop a number of highly relevant communicative skills, among them linguistic, meta-linguistic, and intercultural competences. The reception of poetry can be taken as a starting point for tasks involving oral and written production in terms of explanatory, analytic, or reflective texts, interaction in terms of discussing the possible meanings students discover in the poetic text as well as mediatory activities to support each other in performing these tasks. Such activities could culminate into learners working on their own creative texts.

Based on the reasons outlined above, the authors will argue that poetry can provide new and interesting modes of access towards language learning, most notably through following the action-oriented approach, in spite of, or perhaps precisely because of its generally hands-on, pragmatic character. The opportunities poetic texts offer to stimulate learning processes become most obvious in mediation activities, as the complex meaning-construction of poetic texts requires careful preparation, scaffolding and (peer) feedback to establish intersubjective verification. The CEFR/CV is therefore a most valuable resource for the creation of tasks revolving around the discussion and evaluation of poetic texts, providing a considerable range of descriptors which can be operationalized to give these tasks meaningful goals and structure. If these are meaningfully implemented in the task or project design, the social dimension which is so important in meaning construction and the resulting learning processes can also be addressed and activated in situations of remote teaching and learning, i.e., transported into digital media – if not in full so at least to a large extent.

The project described in this article was initially intended to be a classroom experiment rather than a fully-fledged research project, so that the methodology applied is of necessity determined – and, admittedly, limited – by the ‘a posteriori’ approach the authors have taken. Their findings are thus for the most part derived from action research in the widest sense of the term<sup>3</sup>, with some attempts at qualitative analysis. These, besides being based on the assessment of students’ spoken and written productions, mainly consist of the interpretation of summative evaluative statements students made about their experience as well as participative observations of the interaction with the poet and their peers during the poetry reading.

Referring to previous research, the authors will outline the task design and implementation of the learning unit based on the principles of the action-oriented approach. They will formulate some insights and draw conclusions about the role of poetry in foreign language acquisition which result from an analysis based on the conceptual underpinnings of the CEFR and the CEFR/CV. The claims made here in reference to observed learning outcomes are consequently informed by socio-constructivist theories of

3. The approach taken does not correspond to the concept of action research proposed by Birch et al. 2021. As the idea of our small-scale research project was conceived after the fact, we cannot lay claim to the scientific rigor these authors justifiably demand.

learning and thus based on the premise that competences are mainly developed in circular interactive/collaborative and mediated processes of meaning construction (Piccardo and North 2019: 27, 42, 51-53), feedback and reflection which lead to cognitive development and the improvement of those competences activated to solve the tasks at hand. (see for example North 2020: 554-555; Piccardo and North 2019: 53-54; Piccardo et al. 2019: 18). The conclusions presented, however, will certainly require corroboration through further empirical research before they can raise a claim to general validity.

## 2 Origin of the idea for a poetry reading

How did a live poetry reading with an author from and based in Sierra Leone and an international group of students enrolled in an online advanced English language course offered by the Language Learning Center of the University of Applied Sciences in Cologne, Germany (TH Köln) come about? Sometimes the best ideas materialize through a variety of favorable circumstances, and a dash of spontaneity.

Essentially, the idea for integrating a poetry reading which complements the themes and topics addressed in the course book (*New Language Leader, Advanced*) into the syllabus of a C1 English course had great appeal in the unforeseen predicament of having to implement remote learning formats on account of the lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic. As most university courses at the TH Köln switched over to the online format where students and teachers met via video conference instead of in a classroom, innovative ideas for engaging language course participants in an interactive and action-oriented context were highly sought after.

When the author Ivan Bio mentioned that he recently published a collection of poems and would be keen to participate in an interactive context with students where he could share his experiences through his lyric, the plan for an online poetry reading as a cumulative extension task to the regular unit in our blended learning course C1 English during the winter semester of 2021-2022 took form. It promised not only to introduce a new and exciting form of language in a cognitively appropriate manner, but also to train students' cultural responsiveness (Gay 2010) by providing them with the opportunity to interact authentically with the poet as a representative of another culture – in terms of his national and ethnic, but also his professional and personal background. On the other hand, the themes addressed in the poems are universal in ranging from social justice to personal accounts of racism, love relationships and familial ties and therefore appeared to be an ideal and logical extension of a course book unit entitled *Creativity: People and Ideas*.

## 3 Task design and implementation of the poetry reading

For the reasons expounded in the introduction, the use of poetic texts as the main focus of a course unit was a new project for the authors. At the Language Learning Center of TH Köln, the greatest store is set by courses being action-oriented and learner-centered, with functional and authentic learning outcomes which take into account the concrete needs and requirements of students in terms of not only their degree courses but also their professional futures. In spite of the general (theoretic) change in attitude towards the use of literature in language courses described above, using poetry in a language course with this objective therefore appeared to be a rather exotic idea at our institution. However, the instructor considered this very special project of having a West African poet at the very beginning of his career read out some of his poems and offer them for discussion to a group of students at a German University of Applied Sciences as a chance to take the culturally responsive practices (Gay 2010) established in the course to yet another level. These included building a safe and inclusive atmosphere where participants form learning relationships through a variety of interactive tasks as well as by providing opportunities for students to reflect on their learning processes. Throughout the duration of the semester, students got to know more about each other's backgrounds, thereby boosting their willingness to share opinions and perspectives in open discussions. This not only helped the participants to develop relevant language skills but raised their awareness of cultural differences and similarities.

The ultimate aim of the project, accordingly, was not just to enliven the course and thus lead to an increase in participants' interest, but also to help them achieve relevant learning objectives, in this way serving more than just one motivational factor.

With the support of the director of the language learning center, who offered valuable advice on creating action-oriented and learner-centered tasks, the authors of this paper, namely the course instructor and the coordinator in charge, discussed the design of the learning unit in terms of preparing the poetry reading, outlining the course meeting within which it would take place and bringing the unit to a meaningful conclusion. These steps are in accordance with the key prerequisites of tasks in the context of action-oriented approaches, namely goal, context, meaning, interaction, cognition and outcome (Piccardo and North 2019: 135).

### **3.1 Intended learning outcomes**

Following the principles of the action-oriented approach and constructive alignment, the first question to be addressed in designing the set of tasks to be performed in this project was which specific learning outcomes we could hope to achieve by asking our students to read, to listen to, and to discuss poetry. The unit was intended to include all modes of communication, starting with reception and, based on production and interaction, leading on to mediation activities which also required students to employ strategies to achieve the intended results. This was done with the aim to offer students opportunities to develop a wide range of linguistic, sociolinguistic as well as pragmatic competences (Hassan 2016: 138). In addition, the specific nature of our project also required the inclusion of meta-linguistic competences in order to enable them to analyze poetic language and reflect and speculate on its effects on the reader/audience.

As far as linguistic competences are concerned, we felt justified in expecting that students would expand their lexical repertoire and consequently the range of options from which to choose, being able to exploit "synonyms of even words [...] less commonly encountered." (COE 2020: 131). A closer analysis of poetic devices, on the other hand, might support the course participants in developing an awareness of idiomatic language use and learning how to play with words (COE 2020: 131), thus enriching their ability to convey implicit meaning in the foreign language.

In order to expand students' sociolinguistic competences, the instructor aimed at developing their ability to understand not only irony, but also implicit cultural references and more subtly expressed nuances of meaning (COE 2020: 137). Language production and interaction skills should benefit from the exposure to poetic language in relation to learners' ability to use language flexibly and effectively. In a wider sense, taking students to a higher level of sensitivity to linguistic features as they occur in poetry was also intended to raise their capacity to feel and express empathy and their tolerance of ambiguity.

In the direct interaction with a poet from a different cultural background who was willing to expose himself not only to their questions but also to potentially critical comments, we felt entitled to assume that the students would also be able to increase their awareness of social appropriateness, respect and the ability to use language diplomatically in order to avoid or mitigate conflict (COE 2020: 137). These skills we consider essential not only to ensure sociolinguistic appropriateness, but also to the successful implementation of mediation activities which are so important to achieve a co-construction of meaning amongst representatives of different cultural contexts.

The expansion of the lexical repertoire and the heightened awareness of sociolinguistic aspects of language of necessity should inform the pragmatic competence of learners as well. They can show greater flexibility through the advanced and varied use of vocabulary and the more precise modulation of meaning (COE 2020: 138). The thematic development of spoken and written text should improve as poetry forces learners to tackle complex ideas and present them in more elaborate ways (COE 2020: 140). A third area of pragmatic competence to be fostered in the analysis and discussion of poetry is

prepositional precision, which refers to learners' ability to differentiate varying degrees of meaning and make effective use of linguistic modality (COE 2020: 141).

Another area of development where approaches based on the use of creative texts may be of particular value is the range of pluricultural competences described in the CEFR/CV. Specifically, those learning outcomes described in relation to building on one's pluricultural repertoire seem to be of relevance in this context: the ability to "identify differences in sociolinguistic/-pragmatic conventions, critically reflect on them and adjust their communication accordingly", to "sensitively explain the background to and interpret and discuss aspects of cultural values and practices" as well as the ability to "deal with ambiguity in cross-cultural communication and express their reactions constructively and culturally appropriately" (COE 2020: 125) are integral components of students' intercultural communication competence and again form an important basis for mediation activities.

The Companion Volume distinguishes four different types of mediating creative texts, which, its authors claim, are of different cognitive complexity. Describing one's personal response to creative texts and interpreting them are understood to be less complex activities than analyzing and evaluating such texts. In the project we describe, there was a clear focus on the first two activities mentioned, with some guided analysis applying criteria which were introduced for this purpose and a preparatory evaluative task which was, however, kept on a very general level. The descriptors of the skills required for and developed by mediating texts which seem most pertinent to our project are the ability to give a detailed interpretation of a poem which includes reference to learners' responses to certain features of the text and explanations of their significance (COE 2020: 106) and the ability to "describe and comment on ways in which the work engages the audience" (COE 2020: 107).

But it is not just the ability to mediate texts which can be expanded by the exposure to poetry. Just as with other topics, tasks can be set so as to lead students towards the mediation of concepts, so that, for example, they can hone their ability to "show sensitivity to different perspectives within a group, acknowledging contributions and formulating any reservations, disagreements or criticisms in such a way as to avoid or minimize any offense." (COE 2020: 110).

The descriptor formulated in connection with the idea of encouraging conceptual talk seems of particular relevance for our project. It refers to the ability to "ask a series of open questions that build on different contributions in order to stimulate logical reasoning (e.g., hypothesizing, inferring, analyzing, justifying...)." (COE 2020: 113). Asking students to formulate those questions they explicitly or implicitly address when speculating about possible meanings of a poem or its parts with the aim to engage others in an exchange moving toward a co-construction of such meanings is definitely an activity well suited to sharpen this skill.

We hoped to stimulate a discussion between the poet and our students in which, as was pointed out before, they were exposed to experiences of cultural differences (as well as similarities) on various levels. In this sense, the mediation of communication might also conceivably be necessary in order to facilitate communication in the pluricultural space created in our classroom. Central to this idea is the ability to "help maintain positive interaction by commenting on and interpreting different cultural perspectives" (COE 2020: 114).

Where mediation is concerned, a closer look at the strategies outlined in the Companion Volume is most expedient, as they specify the language functions one has to apply when acting as a mediator and are therefore most useful in operationalizing the competences described.

Of the strategies to explain a new concept, the idea of facilitating the understanding of complex issues by reinforcing the central message through repetition/reformulation of key aspects seems to be highly relevant when attempting to make poetic texts more accessible to others (COE 2020: 119). This goes along with the strategy to simplify a text through amplification by giving detailed explanations or adding information to support a reader's understanding (COE 2020: 122).

### 3.2 Preparation of the poetry reading: Initial planning stages

In order to enable our students to achieve as many of the goals outlined above as possible, a number of considerations had to be made in the process of operationalization. The group was quite large and hence also heterogeneous, with twenty-five students majoring in business, informatics and engineering. They came from different European countries, with the majority being German. Course sessions at this time took place in Zoom, with asynchronous course activities being conducted in an ILIAS<sup>4</sup> space set up to complement the synchronous live course meetings. Given these special circumstances, the question arose of how students could be prepared for the poetry reading, where they would have to sense the depth of expression and emotion on the part of the poet and respond appropriately in an online setting. Would it be possible for them to have an authentic experience of the reading, most notably the sensory components used by the poet through intonation, rhyme, meter, and body language, and respond accordingly?

For the poetry reading to run smoothly for all parties involved, three preparatory meetings were held. During the initial planning session where the course instructor shared her project concept with the director and coordinator in charge, different ideas for introducing the topic of poetry as well as different learning tasks to guide language students through the literary learning process were discussed. In a second meeting, the course instructor met with the poet. The main intention here was to give the poet the opportunity to bring forth and develop his ideas for the oral recitation of the three poems he chose to perform. In a final preparatory meeting, all parties met again, including the poet, to do a practice run-through of the instructor's and poet's presentations and finalize the plans for the students' involvement during the event.

Throughout the planning process, the students were kept informed of the content of the meetings which took place behind the course scene. This included them in the process and heightened their awareness of the necessary steps involved in planning a poetry reading at the meta-level, which underlined the authentic, action-oriented approach.

### 3.3 Procedure design of the poetry reading

In view of the heterogeneity of the group, it seemed of the utmost importance to provide students with a common basis for the tasks at hand. Once the topic had been introduced, they were therefore provided with input on poetic forms, techniques, and literary devices.

In a preparatory Zoom meeting, students worked together in breakout rooms in groups of three to four to come up with examples of the most commonly applied poetic devices. While some groups resorted to well known idioms and quotations to illustrate their understanding of the devices, others approached the task in a more playful manner and came up with quite funny phrases, such as "bless the stress" as an example of assonance. Still others found truly poetic formulations, such as "Her hands were as soft as the fur of a kitten." to give an example of imagery.

The first activity in Zoom required students, who again were divided into groups of three to four, to discuss a variety of questions and prompts around their personal experiences and associations with poems and compile their answers in a wiki. These referred to themes commonly addressed in poems, how poems affect the reader, and what issues or problems students themselves might feel motivated to address through writing poetic texts.

In a next step, three poems from the author's published collection *Yellow: Light in the Darkest Times* (2021) were uploaded on ILIAS. The initial e-learning activity asked the participants to contribute their

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4. ILIAS is the central Learning Management System used at TH Köln. The digital platform allows for courses and seminars to implement supplementary asynchronous online activities and tasks, using a variety of instruments to create modern didactic settings for teaching and learning ([https://www.th-koeln.de/hochschule/ilias\\_68258.php](https://www.th-koeln.de/hochschule/ilias_68258.php), last accessed 19 April 2024).

individual responses to one of the three poems to be presented by the author. A digital forum was set up in which students could upload worksheets which guided their initial analysis of the respective text in terms of general interpretations, describing formal aspects of the poem, analyzing the use of imagery and other literary devices as well as producing a short formulation of the message the poem conveyed to them and the students' personal response on both the affective and the cognitive level.

The initial responses students expressed in their worksheets reveal that the three poems affected them quite differently. The poem *Space Between*, in which the lyrical subject expresses remorse over the loss of his love, impressed students mainly through the beauty and the strong emotional impact of its language. One student commented that she 'enjoyed the language, its devices, and how it stirred various emotions in me.'

*A Losing Start*, a poem about racism, also engendered strong emotional reactions in the participants, but in this case mostly through the topic, its relevance in modern society, and the allusions to historical persons. In commenting on the use of poetic devices, one student cites the reference to Margaret Garner, a woman who decided to kill her child in order to protect her from slavery, as a 'rather startling allusion to [...] the killing of her own daughter. The incongruity between motherly love and murder [...] hits the reader deeply just by its seeming casualness!'

But even though the language used in this poem is more rarely mentioned as the aspect that they found most interesting about it, students in this group analyzed its linguistic features quite thoroughly. One student explains that '[The lyrical subject] uses If-clauses to hypothetically compare his situation today with the situation of slaves/activists in the past. With this use of parallelism, he tries to emphasize that racism did not stop with the abolishment of slavery and that there is still a need to fight for equal rights/against discrimination.'

The third poem, *A Mother's Love*, most strongly invited students to identify with the lyrical subject as he celebrates his relationship with his mother. The way the poem describes the bond between a mother and her child made it easy for students to sympathize with the sentiments expressed in this text.

It is quite interesting that in these initial analyses, students generally stated that they liked the poems. Only two qualified their answers by saying that they partly or mostly liked the poem they had analyzed, one being more specific in criticizing the lack of rhyme and structure. It was rather surprising to see that the rather traditional view of gender roles and the occasional use of cliché were not remarked upon by our participants.

What became obvious, though, was that reading the poems and taking a first step towards a closer analysis inspired students to use quite sophisticated language which in some cases even could be claimed to have a certain aesthetic quality.

In the next Zoom meeting, students were asked to discuss the poems in two stages: First, they exchanged views on the poem they had selected for their first guided analysis with those who had chosen the same poem. In the second stage of the meeting, they changed groups and mediated the content of their chosen poem and described their personal responses to those who had analyzed a different poem.

The final preparatory task leading into the poetry reading required students to re-read their initial interpretations of the poem they had selected for analysis and to draft three questions or comments they would like to address to the poet. This activity was supported by providing input on questions to be used in the analysis of poetry. In addition, vocabulary useful for describing tone and attitude in poetry was made available. Students were asked to study these resources before they formulated their own questions and posted them in another digital forum.

The tasks and activities set previous to the actual poetry reading aimed to familiarize the group with relevant terminology as both the instrument of analysis and as a basis of a shared discourse for the negotiation and mutual construction of meaning which happens in the interpretation of literary texts as a form of mediation. In this way, students' linguistic, metalinguistic, and communicative competences

relevant to the reception, analysis, and mediation of poetry were targeted.

In terms of linguistic competences, students showed the ambition to use elaborate and sophisticated language in interpreting the poems and describing their personal responses. Apart from the quite impressive range of vocabulary and structures they applied in some cases, they gave proof of their ability to develop themes and arguments as an aspect of pragmatic competence. When speculating about possible meanings to be included in their interpretations, some students' contributions also demonstrated propositional precision as a further indicator of pragmatic competence.

The metalinguistic competences students had acquired in the process of preparing the poetry reading were clearly revealed in their analyses of the poetic devices they identified in the poems. Even though the results presented in the worksheets quite obviously cannot lay claim to being comparable with expert literary criticism, students were able to identify the most common forms of figurative language, such as similes and metaphors as well as the use of imagery with a high degree of accuracy and offered interesting suggestions in describing the significance of such devices for their understanding of the text.

As far as their communicative competences are concerned, the mediation of texts was focused in the worksheets, guiding students to apply their newly acquired metalinguistic competences in order to make statements as to the message the poems conveyed to them, with the goal of making the texts more accessible to others.

### **3.4 The poetry reading**

The poetry reading with Ivan Bio on 11 January 2022, was attended by 22 of the 25 regular course participants and three additional guest students from the C2 course, so participation was high. After the instructor had given an overview of the agenda for the session, the Director of the Language Center and the Coordinator in charge briefly spoke about the role poetry had in their lives and specifically in their language learning processes.

Due to the autobiographical nature of the themes addressed in the poems, Ivan Bio introduced himself in a narrative setting by speaking about a set of character traits he values most which also underscored his inspiration for writing poetry. In doing so, he gave students a clear example of using language creatively, describing himself as 'a work in progress' and encouraging students to 'always aspire to be the better version of yourself'.

Students were thus tuned in on the discussion of creative language exemplified by Ivan Bio's poems. Since it was a central aspect of our project to place the focus on the students' personal interpretations of the poems and to see how these would be transformed by hearing the poems recited, the actual readings by the poet were framed by student activity. Drawing on the preparatory task of guided analysis of one of the poems, one student of each group took the role of mediator and introduced the poem, giving a brief overview of the theme and content. Then other members of the student audience were asked to share their initial assessment and reaction to the poem and invited to make comments and pose questions they had prepared in the last activity prior to the reading session.

Following the students' lead-in, the poet performed each piece aloud. Afterward, students were encouraged to relay their reactions and their changed perceptions of the poem as well as to ask additional questions. At this time the author revealed more about the contextual background in which his poems were written.

These activities allowed students to once more show their ability to mediate text, giving brief interpretations of what they conceived as the meaning/message of the respective text and describing how they were affected by reading the text and by listening to the author's rendition. In comparing their initial response to their reaction to the poet's performance, very interesting observations were made. One student, referring to the poem on racism, *A Losing Start*, explained that when she read the text she heard a sad voice in her mind, and she was moved by how the poet's reading matched this impression.

Another student, commenting on the same poem, stated that the reading 'had given him chills' and he was 'completely stunned' – a further instance of how the exposure to complex aesthetic language caused students to become quite eloquent in speaking about their observations and responses, being able to use strong, emphatic language to express their thoughts and feelings.

In the discussion of the poem *Space Between* a student explained that when listening to the poet reading it out, she had really been able to feel the 'space between' the lyrical subject and his lost lover.

Referring to the same poem, another student remarked on the 'waves' of emotion he had heard the poet express in this rendition, from regret and sadness to rage. He added that at some points the poet's voice had become very low, which he interpreted as a withdrawal of the lyrical subject 'deep into himself'.

When speaking about the poem *A Mother's Love*, one student wondered about the role of the father, introducing his question to the poet by stating that this question was probably too personal, thus giving him a choice of whether to answer it. This was a nice example of sociolinguistic sensitivity and the awareness that, even though Ivan Bio had been very open and offered deep insight, it was still necessary to respect his privacy..

A strategy several students employed in the exchange with the poet was to offer an observation or an interpretation and ask for confirmation. This linguistic behavior points towards an effort to achieve greater propositional precision in voicing uncertainty about their reception of the texts. But it has even greater significance when seen as an aspect of mediating both concepts and communication<sup>5</sup>, as it is central to the idea and the process of the co-construction of meaning.

In general, the exchange with the poet was characterized by profound interest on the part of the students and conducted in a most respectful and appreciative manner. When concluding the session, students expressed their gratitude and admiration to the poet by turning on a light source for him, thus reflecting on the title of his first collection of poetry, *Yellow: Light in the Darkest Times*.

### 3.5 In hindsight – students' final reflections

In the final reflective task, students were first asked to write an account of their impressions of the poetry reading and of the poet Ivan Bio in a wiki on their learning platform. The instructor uploaded an article on how to give good feedback on poetry as well as a template of phrase starters to help students formulate their responses as all comments were to be collected and forwarded on to the poet.

The activity was guided by a list of question prompts to elicit specific responses:

The event

- What did you like the most about the poetry reading?
- What did you think about the procedure of the poetry reading?
- Was there anything surprising or unexpected that happened during the event?
- What would you suggest changing/adding in a future event such as this?

The author and his poems

- What struck you most about the author?
- Which poem was your favorite and why?
- If you were asked to give Ivan Bio some constructive critical feedback, what would you say?

During the following course meeting, students were put into groups and given the opportunity to discuss their entries with one another in a breakout room. Afterward, the instructor gave time for

5. Kolb (2022: 109), who points out that the three areas of mediation competences addressed in the Companion Volume cannot be clearly distinguished. See also Reimann's criticism of the conceptualization of mediation competences and their operationalizations in the Companion Volume (2022: 52, 59, 64).

students to share some highlights from the group discussion in the plenary.

This most complex and challenging final task was constructed around the idea of students giving the poet feedback after a period of (guided) reflection. The collection of student comments on the poetry reading which was generated in this way was very well received by the poet, who welcomed the feedback, and in turn, the students were equally impressed to have their personal reflections read by the poet. In asking for their feedback on both the implementation of the project as such and the poetry reading, students' agency was highlighted and their awareness of the power and the influence they could exert by using language was raised. They did so by offering some suggestions for improving further events of this kind such as leaving more space for questions after recitals, or expressing the wish to discuss poetry writing from a more general perspective.

In their responses to the poet, students' behavior again clearly showed that they were conscious of the responsibility such empowerment entails. They did not only express their sense of gratitude for having been given the opportunity to be part of a cultural event which some of them experienced as unique, but they also openly voiced their admiration for the poet and his messages to them, since, apart from speaking freely about his poetry and his life, Ivan Bio gave students some pieces of advice gleaned from his personal experience.

Overall, there were few critical voices, although one student noted that "Regarding the poem *Space Between*, I found the text very personal and touching. However, in explaining it I felt [the poet] generalized gender roles a bit and related personal statements and experiences to men and women in general. (He mentioned that women are soft and delicate, and men are in general very physical and driven by sexual deviance.) There were aspects in it with which I am definitely not congruent and which do not correspond to my image of mankind and values. I understood that he wanted to build a bridge of understanding and perceived himself as self-critical and reflexive. However, the generalization in the subsequent discussion rather gave me the opposite impression. But this is perhaps also a somewhat technical view on my part." This student is giving a solid example of critical thinking skills and is very careful and moderate in expressing her opinion. She also takes pains to base it on sound argumentation.

A different point of criticism individual students offered related to the fact that they experienced Ivan Bio's explanations of individual features of his poems as too specific and thus restrictive in terms of leaving room for interpretation. To provide an example, one student advised the poet "to leave the meaning of the title *A Losing Start* ambiguous because it could also refer to the not-so-perfect start of the so praised democracy of the USA. This way, *A Losing Start* could have two main meanings—on the one hand, the development of the lyrical I's self-love, on the other hand, the deficits and the resulting disparities of the beginning of the US-American democracy as well as implications which ensued. Like this, *A Losing Start* would obviously be personal and simultaneously critical towards society." A second participant maintained that "[...] in some cases, for example, when [the author] explained the *whipping tongues* I found it took away some of the mystery around his poems which I think is one of the great things about poetry—having to speculate about certain messages, maybe even finding your own meaning in certain passages." What is expressed here is a desire to leave room for divergent thinking, which appeared most appropriate in the context of this project, as the discussion of poetry seems to be the ideal 'playground' for alternative approaches to teaching and learning<sup>6</sup>. In fact, it seems to echo Piccard et al., who stress the necessity to "examine phenomena from richly articulated different perspectives." (2019:19).

These examples show that, at least in individual cases, the reflection task elicited profound insight on the part of the students, and the depth and scope of their comments were expressed with even greater eloquence than during the preparation and the actual course session.

In addition to the increased awareness students showed about the possibilities language offers and

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6. The idea of divergent thinking is closely linked to the approach of culturally responsive teaching and learning, as Courtney Plotts (2021: 2) points out.

the impact it can have, they also revealed a heightened awareness of the multidimensionality of (cultural) perspectives. In answering the question of as to the poem he liked most, one student explained that the poem *A Losing Start* “just again showed that it is easy to think of racism and segregation as being a thing of the past whilst, in reality, the problem still prevails. It showed me again, that for us living in our protected bubble, it’s easy to downplay these problems because they seem far away. Still, everyone affected by racism is a person with a story of real pain, of real misery. [The poet’s] emotional way of presenting really visualized this problem to me which left me in the most literal sense stunned.” Another student, when speaking about what she liked most about the poetry reading, explicitly stated, “I liked most that we could really see, hear and feel the poems from [the author’s] point of view. The reading shed another light on them and gave me insight in another perspective.”

The power of poetry to change perspectives, perhaps even to convert the infidels, was quite radically illustrated by a student who, when speaking about his favorite poem, said, “My favorite poem was *A Losing Start*, because I felt the anger and all the other emotions which are embedded in the poem through [the author’s] powerful voice. Listening to him reading the poem gave me goosebumps.” It should be noted that this student admitted to having hated poetry during his school time. And when addressing the question of what struck him most about the author, this student continued, “I didn’t expect his life story to be that tough and hard. What really impressed me, was that he managed to stay positive by trying to process his feelings through his art. When you think about a man who served for the army, you don’t expect him to be creative in such a way he is. This contrast made me realize once again, that you shouldn’t judge a book by its cover. He also showed me, that a man can express his feelings despite of the social pressure.”

Even though there was, as the quotations reveal, a certain variation in the quality and the accuracy of language use, what can be said for all of the students is that their contributions were characterized by a tone of deep respect and empathy as well as great appreciation for the author and the instructor for having made this project and the event it culminated in possible. In particular, the sensitivity they showed towards the author’s feelings and the empathetic way they participated in the discussions of the texts – both with written and spoken productions/interactions – testify to the fact that they were able to take the perspective of a representative of several cultural contexts they have no direct access to. This may have been the greatest achievement of our project. The authors would argue that it corroborates the observation made by Hahn et al. (2021: 14) that through authentic learning experiences with poetry their students’ meta-cognitive skills and also their empathy was increased.

## 4 Discussion and conclusion

In this article the authors describe an ex-tempore project centering around the unique opportunity to organize a poetry reading in a blended learning university language course. The ultimate aim in doing so is to demonstrate that aesthetic texts, namely poetry, can serve quite pragmatic purposes in developing a wide range of competences – linguistic, meta-linguistic, pragmatic, and socio-linguistic— which enhance students’ communicative skills in terms of reception, production, interaction as well as mediation.

Based on the assessment of students’ oral and written productions and the observation of their behavior in the interaction with the poet, it can reasonably be claimed that students generally expanded their range of vocabulary, but not necessarily their range of structures or the accuracy with which they use language. On account of their exposure to figurative language, this expansion reaches out into the sphere of connotations, thus significantly enriching students’ vocabulary not just in quantity, but also in the quality of their language use. Another valuable observation, which may be a direct result of such learning progress, was that the enthusiasm and degree in which the students participated in class discussions significantly increased during and after the poetry reading.

Through learning about the connotative value of certain terms and the multiple dimensions of

meanings language can have it may be assumed that students were able to develop a degree of metalinguistic competence. This was supported by providing input which increased students' knowledge about linguistic features and literary devices and by designing tasks which required them to apply this knowledge to the interpretation of poetic texts, thus ultimately raising their awareness of possible effects such devices can create in the reception of texts.

Some students clearly showed an improvement of their pragmatic competence, most notably in terms of the thematic development and the propositional precision of their contributions, but also with respect to the flexibility of their language use.

The very special setting of our project, which cumulated in the direct encounter with a poet from a very different and interesting cultural background required students to draw on several sociolinguistic competences. In the interaction with the poet, students accepted the invitation to express their feelings and demonstrated their ability to use emotional language appropriately. Individual students impressed us very much with their sensitivity to cultural cues in the poems discussed and their ability to discern finer nuances of meaning. This, we would argue, is the ideal basis for the development of mediation skills such as facilitating plurilingual space.

There is at least one striking example of student behavior that testifies to the fact that they possessed or developed aspects of this kind of mediatory competence. As was pointed out before, throughout the project students—all except one – refrained from passing judgment on the more traditional world view which at times became apparent in the texts. Thus, students were able to move beyond what was socially acceptable from their own point of view towards a respectful acceptance of the attitudes and values transported by the poems. While it may appear that this amounts to a suspension of critical thinking, modern research suggests that, on the contrary, this withholding of judgment, of accepting alterity without forced attempts to appropriate or integrate it, could also be interpreted as testimony of a resistance towards the disambiguation of culture (Osthues and Pavlik 2022: 20). This is very much in line with the wish expressed by some of our students not to destroy the 'mystery' of the poetic text by offering an explanation which is supposed to rule out all other potential interpretations. We are here given an instance of the kind of transcultural competence which allows the 'other' to remain in their alterity (Alter 2016: 58), which accepts complexity and ambiguity. Central to this concept is the ability to change one's perspective (Alter 2016: 51; see also Kolb 2022: 112), which was certainly exercised in our poetry project, as has been explained above.

However, it should be noted that the tasks within the project were designed with a more general idea of developing intercultural competences. Transcultural learning was not targeted as such, and consequently, it would be very difficult to prove that students consciously applied this competence. We can only claim that we observed such behavior, and in some cases the attitude behind it – this being quite likely the area of competence where poetry can have the greatest impact. While attitude may be something we cannot and perhaps should not assess, we hope to have shown that our students also developed competences for which test constructs could be designed.

In the context of socio-constructivist theories, mediation, through offering opportunities "to verbalise, clarify and extend [the learner's] own knowledge" can be regarded as the ideal medium and mode of communication in which learning processes take place (North and Piccardo 2022: 31; see also Katelhön and Marečková 2022: 9). Even though we cannot offer proof for our hypotheses about the progress of our learners in the form of empirical data, current research in this respect appears to corroborate our claims.

Students repeatedly commented upon the very special nature of their learning experience made possible by our poetry project, which did not only pose cognitive challenges but involved them emotionally as well. Their reflections reveal that they were generally deeply touched by the strength and the beauty of the poems as well as by the poet's frankness and his willingness to show profound emotions. Some spoke of being stunned or even shocked by the poem *A Losing Start*, reactions which reflect the power of

literature to irritate and disrupt. Osthues and Pavlik (2022: 21) expand this notion to culture as a ‘space between’, a third space as defined by Bhabha, who describes it as an area of uninhibited communication in which there is a permanent change between disruption and the negotiation of social levels of tolerance (see also Piccardo and North 2019: 22; 210, who refer to Kramsch’s conceptualization of the term and the related notion of symbolic competence). Küster (2015: 20) is another voice who speaks of the potential to irritate which aesthetic experience is charged with. It is this special characteristic which, he argues, accounts for the special relevance aesthetic practice can have for educational processes. This takes us back to Swain, who encourages us to see cognition and emotion as contiguous or even integrated. He maintains that “[c]ognition and emotion may unite and enhance each other to yield an outcome greater than either of them alone.” (2011: 203; see also 2011: 197) – a statement the authors of the present text would, based on their observations of student behavior, most certainly subscribe to.

We were certainly very lucky in being offered this unique opportunity of organizing a poetry reading and designing a small-scale project around it for our course<sup>7</sup>. Even though we were aware of the risks entailed in confronting a culturally heterogeneous student group with a representative of yet different cultural backgrounds, and this in a virtual course space, in the end we felt confident that it would be worthwhile. It took great effort on the part of the instructor to design the project in stages which meaningfully built up to the attainment of different learning outcomes and thus carefully preparing students for each step to be taken.

The authors are well aware that on account of the ex-tempore nature of this small-scale project and the lack of time in preparing it, there are a number of things which, given more time, could have been done differently. The action-orientation of the procedure could have been enhanced by formulating more comprehensive and complex tasks for the preparation of the meeting with the poet. The participants could have been given greater responsibility and become more involved by doing prior research on the forms and language of poetry themselves, for example.

Further tasks could have been devised for the input provided, to make it more fruitful for students’ applications, and the activities could have been more collaborative. Such activities could, for example, target the development of analytical skills or of writing competences, and perhaps even include the implementation of large language models.

As far as the procedure described in this article is concerned, there is definitely room for improvement and expansion which might lead to a basis for standardization or even the development of a model for units on poetry, of the kind of the ‘poetry box’ developed by Hahn et al. (2021). The idea of experiential learning these authors based their project on has, however, certainly been realized by the poetry project at hand, and the process of communal experience between the poet and the readers/learners could not be achieved in any better way than in a direct interaction with the author of the poems we designed our project around.

In the end, we felt most rewarded when this interaction found its climax in a moment of both visually and emotionally rare beauty when the audience lighted candles in appreciation of the poet. We felt that it was indeed remarkable that such a sense of deep emotional attachment amongst persons who did not know each other well or not at all was possible in a Zoom meeting. In their reflections, some students mentioned that they would have wished the event to have taken place in a direct physical encounter, but at this stage in the pandemic the online format was more or less taken for granted and all participants in the meeting were able to communicate their commitment and their feelings through the digital medium.

Looking back at the project as a whole, we believe that it is justified to argue that the blended learning format, which in the case described consisted of online activities exclusively, has not been an

7. Instructors may find it very difficult to organize a poetry reading with an author, but poetry can be approached in many different ways. For example, students themselves could take on the role of the poet (Hahn et al. 2021).

impairment but, on the contrary, has been greatly conducive to the objectives we hoped to achieve. It is precisely the combination of synchronous and asynchronous activities which helps students gain their own momentum and find their own rhythm and can thus, perhaps paradoxically, serve the purpose of deceleration which experts like Küster (2015: 22) associate with aesthetic practices in educational processes. And it is these practices and the experience they created in the project at hand, which, in the words of one of our students, 'made a lasting memory'.

It cannot be stressed enough that such aesthetic practices and experiences and the social dimension within which they become meaningful could be realized in a course where the live meetings took place in Zoom. The authors believe that the action-oriented approach they chose for their poetry project is essential in this respect, and that this approach is the solution to the problem of the social distancing which is one of the consequences of the increasing digitalization of our modern world. It brings learners together in collaborative activities and provides opportunities to experience learning progress and success together. In mediation activities this is taken even further, as students support each other to their mutual benefit, and, on a meta-level, learn that they can gain ever so much if they open their perspectives to look beyond their immediate personal needs and demands.

The social dimension which is at the very core of the action-oriented approach and its fundamental principle that meaning has to be co-constructed in collaborative, i.e., social processes, gains a very special significance where poetic texts are concerned. Poetry does not have meaning in any factual sense, it is dependent on the extent to which interpretations are intersubjectively verifiable. On the other hand, it does not have to be pinned down to just one interpretation, and is thus illustrative of the fact that the co-construction of meaning will necessarily remain incomplete and compromised by the limits of communication. To understand this can raise the awareness of the importance of context and the ways in which the individual is determined by his\*her cultural background (Piccardo and North 2019: 19).

Such limitations, however, are often overcome in the emotional realm. This again, is most notable when using poetry for purposes of language learning, as the meaning we assign to poetry goes beyond the cognitive and reaches out to the emotional domain. Under the premise that bonds between individuals are both formed and strengthened by shared emotions, it is safe to assume that poetry in the language classroom can engender very special and very fruitful learning experiences not only in terms of cognitive development, but also in terms of emotional and social development.

The authors hope to have demonstrated that, given the specific task design chosen for the project, the participants were able, to different extents, to acquire new competences with respect to the critical analysis of texts and of discussing their insights and opinions in interculturally appropriate ways in the context of activities which, at least in part, had mediatory aspects. In doing so, some of them showed that they were able to take different perspectives, respond to others in a supportive and empathetic manner, and tolerate ambiguity – skills which both inform and are the result of action-oriented tasks in which learners take the position of social agents (Piccardo and North 2019: 198).

As Piccardo and North (2019: 20) referring to Baumann's notion of 'liquid modernity' explain, social dimensions of learning gain a very special significance in postmodern times, in which the individual experiences feelings of uncertainty and loss of control. The solution they suggest is to help our students become representatives of the species of the 'homo complexus', who is "at ease with the unknown and embraces non-linearity". One way to achieve this, as we would argue, is to expose our students to the complexities of poetic language, to have them exercise the reception of poetic texts through implementing interaction and mediation in order to make them aware of the fact that, as Piccardo and North point out, language is not just a means of expression, but also a vehicle to access "the other", and to help each other in their meaning construction processes and thus in understanding an ever more complex world. The relevant skills are essential requirements for accepting diversity and for participating in peaceful, even if at times controversial exchanges with representatives of different cultures and, as a consequence, the development of these skills is an important step towards the ideal of democratic citizenship – one of the principles promoted by the authors of the CEFR.

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## 6 Biographies

**Ursula Hehl** holds a doctoral degree in English Philology. Her dissertation *Manifestationen narzisstischer Persönlichkeitsstörungen in Shakespeares romantischen Komödien* was published in 1995. After having worked as an instructor of foreign languages in the tertiary sector, she became a coordinator of language courses, first at the Language Center of the University of Bonn and, since 2011, at the Language Learning Center of TH Köln. Her research interests include English for Specific/Academic Purposes, intercultural competences, the implementation of the CEFR/CV, and mediation as a key competence for the (foreign) language learner.

**Anne Laaredj-Campbell** holds a PhD in Ethnology from the Albert Ludwigs University in Freiburg. After a four-year research stint in Algeria, she published her dissertation entitled *Changing Female Literacy Practices in Algeria: Empirical Study of the Cultural Construction of Gender and Empowerment*. She has extensive experience as a teacher/instructor of foreign languages. Since 2022, she coordinates the eTwinning component of the Erasmus+ Program for school education at the National Agency for Pedagogical Exchange Services (PAD) in Bonn, Germany. Her teaching and research interests include action-oriented and culturally responsive approaches to language acquisition in the context of blended learning.



In the understanding of societal inequities.

So, this shade that will always follow me,  
Does not determine the content of my character  
Nor does it say that I am just another  
Ni\*\*\*r.

If I was to pull the trigger,  
For all the countless times, I have been made to feel bitter,  
Then this finger would be calloused.  
But I ask why be troubled?

A losing start, an idea that does not diminish my self-worth.  
Only the catalyst that fuels the desire to increase my net  
Worth.

### **Space Between**

The space between us  
was created by my lies.  
The type of lies that reverberate,  
sending echoes that penetrate  
the chambers of your heart,  
received instantaneously.

Because the proportion of my lies to the magnitude of hurt I  
have caused, is unequivocally equal in number.

This means there is no delay from the minute my selfish lips  
form to resemble something of the legendary sword wielded  
by Arthur, lacerating your very being to the smallest particle.

So reads the article, far from a King – trying to be heroic but  
here I stand as the villain.

A character accustomed to his own self-destruction.

Fighting against my own happiness, I suppress the memories  
of our unbounded intimacy, which we mutually conducted  
in privacy.

With clarity, I remember you were my Queen. Never gave  
me divine sovereignty, but I ruled your amicable heart. You

trusted me; your words pure as the Virgin Mary.

And I,  
I trusted me, giving into my sinful nature as I allowed my  
mind to fantasize of another.

How unholy, how unholy of I to use my tongue in  
blasphemy as I denied your existence on many occasions, for  
the purpose of my sexual deviance.

Instead, I should have been on bended knees,  
Anointing the center of your most prized possession with my  
tongue – your mind.

Your mind should have been glorified on knees that should  
be permanently calloused...  
From constantly thanking the Maker,  
but I am a gluttonous taker.

My nonchalant attitude, chilled and unperturbed, ignored  
your grievances. My extensive vocabulary consisted of: me  
me's and I I's. What should have been was: you and I and  
forever and forever till death do you and I part,

But only in the sense of the physical world and if I, should  
have adequately fulfilled my duties as a true and committed  
lover then in the dimensions of the spirits you and I would  
have reunited, a rekindling our burning desires for one  
another. I took that away from us. I failed. I failed you in the  
worst of ways.

Maybe, if I could have mastered the art of self-control and  
reigned in my wondering eyes, my vision would have been  
clearer.

20/20 is the rating you deserved. Anything less than that  
would have been dishonesty and right in this moment, I  
realize this is the most honest thing I have uttered.

What I'm trying to say is, you are beauty in its highest form.  
All that is goodness, fairness, compassion, and patience...you were it and more – standing right in  
front of me.

But I ruined it, this I'm sure. The space between us was  
masterminded by your very own:  
Deceitful lover, despicable and lover.

Now I sit in shameful regret thinking how my actions never  
found ways to thank you for the wonderful soul you had.

And how these once privileged eyes never thanked you  
deeply for the pleasures it received from staring at your  
breath-taking contour.

You never needed me to complement you, but with your  
soft lips and angelic voice, you always reassured me that I  
was the highlight of your life.

You gave me special preference and the nature of my  
manhood thanked you, as it penetrated the sweet waters that  
was abundant in your vessel.

However,

With time all good things come to an end...

You gave me everything good...all of you  
And I took every inch I could...

Magnifying the,

Space Between.

### **A Mother's Love**

I don't know how to start but I will give it a try.  
And this try that I am attempting is nowhere close enough  
to the degree of approbation, you deserve.

Here is my attempt.

For nine months you carried me,  
For nine months you loved me,

nourished me.  
Knowing how I am...  
I can only imagine that those nine months were everything  
but easy.

Still...  
You endured; you outlasted the struggles not only within  
But also, from the whipping tongues of those that  
surrounded you;  
You chose me...so that I can have life.  
How can I not be grateful?

So, I choose you.  
To be forever your son.  
To love you unconditionally...because...

You see, to me our bond is like a marriage.  
Not just any marriage.  
A marriage of intertwined hearts that honors the very  
tradition till death do us part  
And even when that death comes and we transcend into the  
realm of the unknown,  
I will still love you.

When I doubted myself, you still believed in me.  
When I had nowhere to lay my head, you made your chest a  
resting place.  
You blanketed me with words of comfort.  
Somehow, you always managed to iron out my pain.  
Equipped with sharp creases,  
You gave me confidence.  
You watched proudly as your son dared to challenge the  
world.

With you your wisdom,  
at times you would let me intentionally fail.  
Not because your love changed as the seasons.  
But because you desired to cultivate...  
To cultivate me in such a way that you knew will prepare me  
to face the harsh realities of the world.

You made me strong.  
Physically, by encouraging me to push through despite how  
often my knees buckled and made acquaintance with the  
hardened world.

Mentally, by challenging me to never settle for mediocrity  
because the truth is for a black man, all roads are not so  
equally paved.

Emotionally, by telling me it is okay to love.  
By telling me that as a man, showing emotions does not  
make me weak,  
rather the opposite.  
You made me strong.

Two things are true:  
First, behind every strong man is an even stronger woman.  
The second, a mother knows best.

I know this is a long-winded way of me telling you how  
Much I appreciate and love you.  
Honestly, it should be longer, but I will spare you the extra  
words and just tell you this...

Mother, or “mommy” as how I naturally call you...

I love you, just the way you are.

Ivan Bio. 2021. *Yellow: Light in the Darkest Times*, pages 18-27  
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