

## THE HEARTSTOPPER PROJECT: RESULTS FROM A COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT IN THE SECONDARY EFL CLASSROOM

Dieser Artikel stellt die Zusammenarbeit zwischen Lena, einer Sekundarlehrperson, und Nikola, Dozentin und Forscherin an der Pädagogischen Hochschule Zürich, vor. Gemeinsam entwickelten und führten wir das *Heartstopper*-Projekt zweimal im Rahmen eines Wahlfachs mit Schüler:innen der 9. Klasse durch. Das Projekt wurde als explorative Studie konzipiert und umfasste die Erhebung und Auswertung verschiedener Datenquellen, darunter Fragebögen, Gruppeninterviews, Beobachtungsnotizen sowie von den Lernenden erstellte Materialien. Im Zentrum des Forschungsinteresses stand die Frage, wie Jugendliche der Sekundarstufe I auf die Serie *Heartstopper* und das Thema Diversität reagierten und ob das Projekt dazu beitragen konnte, ihre Kompetenz im Umgang mit Serien im Englischunterricht fördern. Zugleich bot das Projekt Raum für reflexive Praxisforschung und die Frage, welche Erkenntnisse wir aus der Zusammenarbeit zwischen Lehrperson und Forschender gewinnen konnten.

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### Initiating the collaboration

In the summer of 2023, we, Lena and Nikola, met for coffee and when we parted 2 hours later, we decided to collaborate on a teaching project using the series *Heartstopper* in one of Lena's classes. A couple of weeks before, Nikola, who is a researcher and lecturer for English methodology at the University of Education in Zurich, had agreed to write a contribution for a publication on popular series in English language education including a set of teaching materials. Nikola's choice had fallen on *Heartstopper*, a Netflix series based on a graphic novel. She has been researching over the past years into the powerful multimodal interplay of words and images in graphic narratives and was now curious how this would be transported into an audio-visual medium. Lena, who at that time had been teaching at a secondary school in the canton of Zurich for four years, first had to familiarize herself with the material and decide whether *Heartstopper* would be suitable for her 9th grade attending

the elective module 'English Literature'. *Heartstopper* tells the story of a romance between two teenage boys and is situated at a British boys' school. Charlie, a gifted student, is openly gay whereas Nick, a popular member of the rugby team, perceives himself as straight since he had a crush on a girl some time ago. Over the course of the first season, Nick comes to understand his bisexuality, while he and the other protagonists navigate various teenage challenges, including emotional turbulence, mental health struggles, and the overarching exploration of sexual identity, all within an LGBTQ+ framework. The first season of *Heartstopper* premiered on Netflix in April 2022 and comes with eight episodes of roughly 30 minutes.

Lena confirmed that *Heartstopper* would be a valuable choice for her class. What had convinced her were the gentleness of how the romance between the boys developed and the fact that it displayed diversity in a non-stereotypical way, in combination with features like the

understandability of the language, the length of an episode, the age level which parallels that of her students as well as the fact that it is a recent series and very up-to date, and that it comes with an appealing soundtrack. Thus, we collaborated for the publication and co-created a set of materials (see Mayer & Schwarz 2025).

## Our project design

The *Heartstopper* Project took place for the first time in the fall semester 2023. Seven 9th grade students aged 14 to 15 participated in the elective English literature class. The students came from diverse backgrounds and had various levels of proficiency in English. In total, we worked for 18 lessons on the project. Our teaching approach was mostly based on pre-, while- and post-viewing activities. With each of the materials we aimed to reach a variety of learning objectives such as taking on different perspectives or comparing visual storytelling approaches in the graphic novel and the series. The students were able to practice different skills such as writing, speaking, reading but also listening-viewing. We also worked with creative elements like the design of a personal *Heartstopper* page. With our materials, we wanted to enhance the students' "series\_serial" literacy which can be defined as "the learner's ability to use audio-visual series and serials<sup>1</sup> [...] critically and autonomously in the context of English language education" (Leonhardt & Viebrock, 2025: 23).

After developing the materials and the project outline together, each of us took on a distinctive role in the first round of our small-scale explorative study: Lena was in charge of teaching and Nikola signed responsible for the research aspects. Our research questions were centered on how the lower secondary students would respond to watching the series *Heartstopper* with a focus on diversity / LGBTQ+ and on how the project could promote "series\_serial" literacy. We also wanted to find out more about what we as teachers and researchers could learn from this. In this article, we put a special focus on this aspect, emphasizing our collaboration.

We began the project with a questionnaire about students' viewing and streaming habits, their prior knowledge

of *Heartstopper*, and LGBTQ+-related issues. A major source of data came from the materials produced by the students over the project. To evaluate the project, we conducted a semi-structured group interview of 45 minutes with four students. During the interview, we explored their opinions on the series and the project, asked them to rank the activities and comment on their work, and directly addressed the topic of diversity. Additionally, we gathered observation notes and Nikola conducted a post-project interview with Lena.

To analyze the questionnaire, we combined qualitative and quantitative approaches, using pie and bar charts while filtering relevant responses. For the group interview, we applied qualitative content analysis, collaboratively developed a code tree, and used the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. To ensure inter-rater reliability, we each applied the codes independently to the interview data, then compared and discussed our results, refining the code tree as needed. This process was particularly valuable for understanding the students' perspectives and revealed how our own viewpoints shaped our interpretations. We also applied the code tree and MAXQDA to analyze the students' products. Linking various data sources proved especially insightful.

## Two sample analyses

In one task the students could choose 2-3 stills from the series and link them with a panel from graphic novel adding typical comics features like sound, speech

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the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW) and completed her teacher training degree at the Zurich University of Teacher Education (PHZH). She wrote her master's thesis with Nikola Mayer, focusing on bringing literature to the EFL classroom.

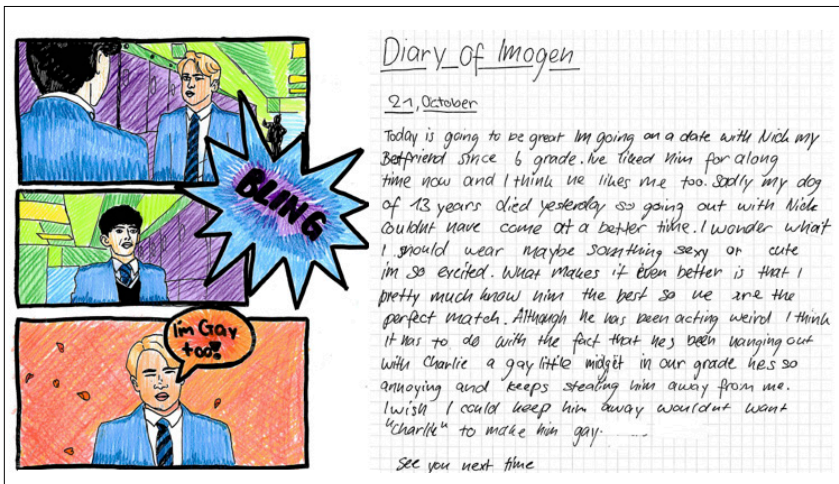


Nikola Mayer is a professor and lecturer at the Zurich University of Teacher Education for teaching English at the

secondary level. Her research focuses on the integration of graphic narratives into the EFL classroom and the promotion of visual and multimodal literacy. Over the past years she has taught many students, and it is a great pleasure when collaborations like the one with Lena Schwarz result from this.

<sup>1</sup> Leonhardt and Viebrock (with reference to Kelleter 2017, Fröhlich 2018) differentiate between series where each episode tells a complete story and serials where the episodes tell an on-going story. For the sake of simplicity, we decided on using the more common term "series" in this publication.

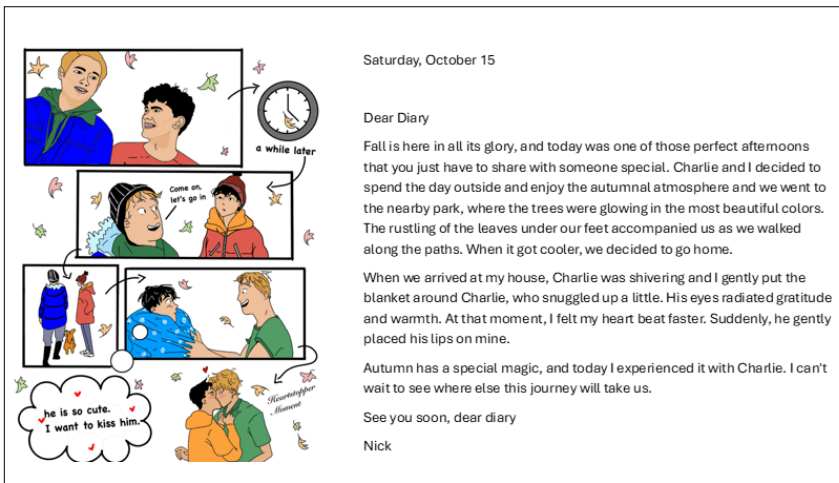
ballons or symbols. When the art-based part was done, they wrote a text, a script or a dialogue from the perspective of the characters.



**Figure 1**  
Student sample 1 – Heartstopper page and diary entry, published with permission by the creators and their parents

wants to go out with Nick. She put herself in the shoes of Imogen, who is worried about the date: “He’s been hanging out with Charlie, a gay little midget. He is so annoying and keeps stealing him away from me.” Even though the drawing states that Nick is gay, in the text, Imogen still has her hopes up high: “I wouldn’t want «Charlie» to make him gay.” The text brings out strong emotions, an almost aggressive underlying tone, derogatory language and stereotypical statements like “making someone gay”. Text and image underline the student’s discomfort with addressing LGBTQ+ related topics at school.

In the second example, the student’s page captures a so-called ‘Heartstopper moment’ between Charlie and Nick. The high quality of the panels, the use of comic-specific elements like the leaves and the clock combined with the text demonstrate the student’s effort to create a positive representation. By using expressions such as “I gently put the blanket around Charlie”, the student echoed the tonal quality of the relationship between the two boys. In the group interview, this student stated that she found it interesting that *Heartstopper* wasn’t just a typical love story. Moreover, she thought it was important to engage with homosexuality as “it’s really a topic in our society today.” Here, text and image convey a supportive attitude towards diversity.



**Figure 2**  
Student sample 2 – Heartstopper page and diary entry

### Project feedback from the students

In the final evaluation, the four students gave overall positive feedback for the project. They liked working with *Heartstopper* but as it was a love story, they found it “somehow predictable at times” which made it less interesting for them. Some of the students had already watched *Heartstopper* before and they would have preferred a series none of them knew and which came with more surprising twists. In the same vein, they particularly enjoyed activities which opened new doors for them like analyzing the dominant color scheme in the series or applying a model for sexual orientation that we had introduced to them. Our teaching approach of watching the series and working on the activities was criticized by some students (e.g. that watching a series was either boring or not “really

This student was particularly critical about addressing LGBTQ+ issues at school and displayed a very decisive position in the group interview: “I don’t want to see that. I don’t need to see it. It is unnecessary at school.” For the *Heartstopper* page, the student chose a situation featuring Nick and Charlie at the school lockers. It shows the moment when Nick reveals himself to Charlie as gay. The artwork was done with a lot of care, the colors are bright and loud. In the accompanying text, the student took the perspective of Imogen, one of the few straight main characters in the series, who desperately

school”; that switching between tasks and watching was too much variation etc.). At the same time, the students liked what they learned from the individual tasks. We observed that some students already demonstrated “series\_serial” literacy; in the group interview, one student, for example, cross-referenced to how the contrasting backgrounds of protagonists—such as rich versus poor upbringings—often “met the criteria of how series are done.” The student also used terminological language like “plot twist” to describe narrative developments. Another student pointed out that she watched the series differently after having learned to analyze its color code.

### **Our conclusions after teaching *Heartstopper* for the first time**

For us the project showed that *Heartstopper* was a suitable choice for the ELT classroom since all students were able to follow the series well with the subtitles. After the project, some students informed us that they felt more confident in English and that their grades in the regular English class had gone up. We could see that the students gained new insights and dealt with the topic of diversity. The fact that some students responded critically helped us become more sensitive to their perspectives and consider ways to better prepare them in a future round. To enhance the students’ “series\_serial” literacy, we felt that we needed to focus more on terminology (see below) and support the students with awareness-raising activities. Furthermore, we were not satisfied with how we embedded the series. Working on tasks and watching the series called for more selection of what we would include. In addition to the school level, we also considered it to be important to share the experience and the learnings from the *Heartstopper* Project with the students at university level and to draw their attention to working with diversity related topics and series in the EFL classroom.

### **Re-teaching the *Heartstopper* Project**

After evaluating our project and presenting our findings in September 2024 at the RPFLC Conference 2024 “From empirical research to foreign language classroom

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practice and vice versa”, we decided that we wanted to further develop and re-teach the *Heartstopper* Project, so we set up a revised project plan. This time, 18 students had enrolled for the elective class ‘English literature’. We scheduled our work with the series from November to April, covering 16 lessons. The 9th graders’ motivation to take the class was diverse – some of them wanted to improve their English language skills, some liked reading and some had heard that we were going to work with the series *Heartstopper*. To avoid misunderstandings, we decided to start off with a lesson about “What is literature?”, making clear that not only novels but also poetry as well as drama – and even films and series – are part of a comprehensive and multimodal understanding of literature.<sup>2</sup> This approach enabled us to work with the series without facing the pre-concept, expressed by some students in the first round, that watching a series is not something one does at school.

At the beginning of the second round, we put more emphasis on the graphic novel to prepare students for watching the series. This paid off – the students already knew that they were going to see two boys kissing – which then wasn’t as “upsetting” to them as it had been before. Furthermore, in the first round we had focused on watching the episodes 1-3 and 8. In some weeks, we watched snippets,

<sup>2</sup> In contemporary literary and cultural studies, the concept of literature has expanded to include multimodal and audiovisual narratives such as graphic novels, films and series. These forms share essential features with written literature: they construct narrative worlds, develop characters, and invite aesthetic interpretation. This broader understanding requires competences such as media and visual literacy, positioning film pedagogy as an integral part of literary education (see Blell et al., 2016; Hallet 2025: 235).

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of Nikola’s role in the *Heartstopper* Project and became more acquainted with her as a person. Lena on the other hand, took over more initiative in the final evaluations with the students, in general feeling more confident in her role as co-researcher after having gone through the intense analytical process at the end of the first round. With both of us being more active in the roles of teachers and researchers and being more familiar with the *Heartstopper* Project, our exchanges and discussions about the students’ reactions and our teaching gained further depth. This shift in perspective was relevant for both of us – it enabled us to take a bird’s-eye view while maintaining an equal footing with the secondary students.

in others, we did not watch at all. Having learned from this, part of each lesson now was a recap of what had happened so that students who had missed a class could still participate. From episode 4 onwards, we only watched scenes focusing on Nick and Charlie, side characters were left out. This approach made it possible to gain an overview of the first season and to track Nick’s journey more closely. We introduced the task “Nick’s journey” early on and set it up as a while-viewing whereas before it had been a post-viewing task.

Another aim was for students to further develop their “series\_serial” literacy. We had seen glimpses of this but knew we needed to embed it more. For this reason, we now put an emphasis on terminology as well as concepts. To do so, we designed a memory game with the terms and their respective visual representations. We let the students compare the graphic novel and the series using these terms and provided specific language support for tasks where students had to analyze scenes.

Not only did we adapt our teaching approach, but we also both became more involved in the classroom and the research respectively. Nikola joined the lessons on a regular basis which allowed her to closely observe the students’ behavior. She taught parts of the lessons such as the introduction to the terminology memory game and carried out several warmers and activities. Thus, Nikola gained more insights into the students’ perceptions, their interests as well as their competences. Simultaneously, the students gained a deeper understanding

### Linking teaching and researching – the benefits of our collaboration

This long-term collaboration with its different signposts – developing materials, designing the project, writing a first joint article, carrying out the project twice, evaluating the data, presenting the results at a conference and finally co-writing this text – supported both of us in our respective professional lives. Apart from working with the students on the tasks, the evaluations with the students turned out to be one of the highlights for us; later, when we analyzed the data, we found little gems in what they had to say about the *Heartstopper* Project which made us reflect on our concept of teaching. It was impressive to hear more about the students’ opinions and to observe how reflective and engaged they were regarding the project. Especially in the first round, we also observed a loyalty among the students towards those who took a minority position related to LG-BTQ+ topics<sup>3</sup>.

Allowing herself as a teacher to truly engage in a meta-level reflection and a researcher’s perspective and to step away from daily routines such as sticking to the coursebook and established teaching resources had a strong effect on Lena who normally felt the pressure of high pace as a teacher during the term. Collaborating on developing the materials from scratch prompted Lena to rethink her approach to teaching English. Nikola’s support and her affirmation that incorporating a TV

<sup>3</sup> To illustrate this act of loyalty, we include the quotes from two students: “And I think they’re trying to normalize it [the topic of LG-BTQ+, annotation from the authors], but for some, it feels like they’re exaggerating” and “I also understand the people who aren’t interested in the topic and don’t want to know anything about it. And I think that should be accepted if they don’t want to.”

series into English classes aligns with contemporary teaching methodologies boosted Lena's confidence. The project called for extra time and effort, which is not always possible and could not be done in every subject; nevertheless, the outcome cannot be measured in these terms. In the end, what was achieved was a balance between growth as a teacher and further steps towards teacher proficiency.

From Nikola's perspective, the ongoing exchange with Lena and her class as well as the shared responsibility for the teaching and the research was highly beneficial. Being in a classroom on a regular basis and taking over parts of the teaching, helped reshape Nikola's concept of what is possible with a group of 9th graders. Already when planning the tasks, discussing ideas with Lena had been a valuable "reality check"; it was for instance striking for Nikola that Lena agreed to design a task on applying a theory-based model of universal sexual identity to Nick's process. The students at the PHZH benefited from this experience through learning about the project in the modules. As a researcher, Nikola found it enriching to analyze the data from both the practical and theoretical perspective together with Lena. There never really seemed to be a barrier between theory and practice. This long-term collaboration with its different signposts – developing materials, designing the project, writing a first joint article, carrying out the project twice, evaluating the data, presenting the results at a conference and finally co-writing this text – supported both of us in our respective professional lives.

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