

WINDOWS AND MIRRORS: APPROACHING DIVERSITY WITH THE TV SERIES *HEARTSTOPPER* (SEASON 1)

Tema

In diesem Beitrag stellen wir ausgewählte Ergebnisse eines in zwei Zyklen durchgeführten Design-Based-Research-Projekts vor, bei dem die TV-Serie *Heartstopper* (Staffel 1) in einem Wahlfach English Literature mit Neuntklässler:innen einer Sekundarschule in der Schweiz eingesetzt wurde. Die Studie untersucht, wie eine zeitgenössische Fernsehserie in den EFL-Unterricht integriert werden kann, um Sprachlernen, Series_Serial Literacy sowie die Auseinandersetzung mit Diversität (mit dem Fokus auf LGBTQ+) zu fördern. Das Unterrichtsdesign verband sprachbezogene Aufgaben, multimodale Analysen und kreative Produktionsformen. Die Schüler:innen analysierten filmische Gestaltungsmittel, nutzten Fachbegriffe, verglichen medienspezifische Erzählstrategien und reflektierten Identität und Repräsentation mithilfe von Bishops Metapher von Texten als Fenster, Schiebetüren oder Spiegel. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Arbeit mit der Serie *Heartstopper* die sprachliche Entwicklung produktiv mit multimodaler Literalität und kritischer Reflexion verbinden kann und zugleich Raum bietet, um vertieft auf LGBTQ+-bezogene Inhalte einzugehen.

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Over the past two years, we implemented the TV series *Heartstopper* (season 1) twice in an elective English literature class with ninth-grade students at a lower secondary school in the canton of Zurich. *Heartstopper* originally began as a web-comic in 2016 (f.e. on WEBTOONS) and was later published as a graphic novel. Building on the strong support of its fan community, author and illustrator Alice Oseman subsequently wrote a screenplay that adapted the story into a television series, which was soon acquired by Netflix. With *Heartstopper*, Oseman set out to portray the developing relationship between two boys, focusing on their journey from friendship to romance. The main protagonists are Charlie, who is openly gay at the beginning of season 1, and Nick, a rugby player who initially perceives himself as straight before gradually realizing that his feelings for Charlie go beyond friendship.

Based on our experience, the series *Heartstopper* offers rich potential for addressing diversity in the secondary EFL

classroom while productively integrating content-based and creative approaches to language learning. When we first implemented the project in 2023, we designed all teaching materials ourselves (the materials are available through Mayer & Schwarz 2025a). Our primary aim was to explore how a contemporary TV series can be meaningfully embedded in the EFL classroom and, more specifically for working with *Heartstopper*, how students engage with a serial narrative placed in an LGBTQ+ setting (Overview of the Two Teaching Cycles).

Following the initial implementation cycle, we reviewed the entire project and revised several tasks and activities before teaching a second cycle in 2024 (see Mayer & Schwarz 2025b). In this article, we share insights into working with *Heartstopper* and demonstrate how connections can be established between the students' visual and series_serial literacy¹ and the development of their language competencies. To illustrate our approach, we present two tasks – “Windows and Mirrors”

and “Help!” – Nick’s research on the Internet” – both of which foreground learners’ interpretive, reflective, and productive engagement with the series. The chart (figure 1) provides an overview of our teaching sequence. Across the different materials, we aimed to address a range of learning objectives, including taking on another perspective, comparing visual storytelling strategies in the graphic novel and the television series, and engaging in creative design tasks. The students were given opportunities to develop skills central to the EFL classroom, such as writing, speaking, and reading, as well as listening-viewing. Overall, the materials were designed to foster students’ series_serial literacy, understood as the ability to meaningfully engage with, interpret, and reflect on serial audiovisual narratives in a foreign-language context (see Leonhardt / Viebrock 2025).

Reasons for working with *Heartstopper*

Heartstopper portrays a group of grammar school students in a rather optimistic way and offers a positive representation of LGBTQ+ experiences. While this portrayal has been praised for its affirming tone, it has also been criticized for presenting a somewhat idealized version of adolescent relationships and school environments. In the series, conflicts are often resolved quickly and supportive peers and adults are readily available. One might therefore argue that such depictions may simplify the more complex realities many LGBTQ+ adolescents experience. When selecting a series for our teaching project, our aim was to find a series based on a graphic novel that addresses LGBTQ+ issues in a relatable way. For this purpose, *Heartstopper* proved a suitable choice. As a recent coming-of-age series available on Netflix, it is easily accessible to many students. Each season consists of eight episodes of about 30 minutes, which allows individual episodes to be integrated into classroom teaching (ideally one episode per double lesson). The “boy-meets-boy” narrative is set in a British secondary school context that may be familiar to ninth-grade students. The storyline focuses mainly on the development of the central characters and contains relatively few secondary plotlines. The protagonists are close in age to the students, reflecting Alice

Heartstopper Project	Cycle 1 – Fall 2023 – Spring 2024	Cycle 2 – Fall 2024 – Spring 2025
Course	Elective module: English Literature, Grade 9 (Sekundarschule)	Elective module: English Literature, Grade 9 (Sekundarschule)
Schedule	One lesson per week (Friday afternoon)	One lesson per week (Monday afternoon)
Participants	7 pupils aged 14–15	18 pupils aged 14–15
Materials	Self-designed teaching materials (see Mayer & Schwarz, 2025)	Self-designed teaching materials (see Mayer & Schwarz, 2025) plus additional materials
Final project evaluation	One group interview with 4 pupils (approx. 45 minutes)	Four group interviews with 16 pupils in total (approx. 20 minutes per group)

Fig. 1
Overview of the Two Teaching Cycles

1 In academic discourse, a distinction is often made between *series* and *serials*. In a series, each episode can stand alone and tells a complete story, as in *Sherlock* or *The Simpsons*. In contrast, serials follow an ongoing storyline that develops across episodes and seasons, as in *Heartstopper* or *Wednesday*. In this publication we use the more commonly used term “series”.



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MATERIALS	AIMS
Mat 1: Boy meets Boy	I can make predictions (storyline, character traits, etc.). I can analyze a scene from the serial / graphic novel.
Mat 2: Moving from Friendship to Romance	I can analyze different ways of visual storytelling (graphic novel, series). I can create a storyboard for a Heartstopper scene. I can use technical terms (cinematographic and graphic novel specific terminology).
Mat. 3: Windows and Mirrors	I can take different perspectives and reflect on diversity. I can respond to someone's movements in a mirroring activity.
Mat 4: "Help!" – Nick's Research on the Internet	I can compare visual storytelling approaches in the graphic novel and the series. I can analyze visual effects (lighting, colors). I can reflect on the effects of the songs / music.
Mat 5 – Design your personal Heartstopper Page + write a diary entry from the perspective of one of the protagonists	I can create a visual scene based on screenshots and graphic drawings. I can apply visual storytelling approaches from the graphic novel and the serial. I can write a diary entry from the perspective of one of the protagonists of my Heartstopper page
Mat 6: Tracing Nick's Journey	I can understand and apply the unifying model of sexual identity development.
Mat 7: Analyzing the Color Code	I can analyze and reflect on the effects of visual storytelling (color code, symbolism). I can decode symbols of diversity.

Fig. 2
Overview Chart – Materials and Objectives of the Heartstopper Project

Oseman's decision to cast predominantly young, mostly unknown actors for the series, alongside a few established performers such as Olivia Colman in the role of Nick's mother.

The series also features an indie-pop soundtrack that may appeal to young audiences and can be used as additional material in classroom activities (→ Mat. 4). We found the empathetic portrayal of the protagonists who across the seasons deal with complex issues such as toxic relationships, mental health, and sexual identity development, to be one of the series' strengths despite the above-mentioned issues. The caring and supportive language used by Nick and Charlie was echoed by several students in their own language production, for example in the diary-writing task in Mat. 5 (see Mayer & Schwarz 2026). From a language-learning perspective, our students reported that the series was generally easy to understand; we therefore always used English subtitles to ensure that everyone could follow the storyline.

Heartstopper offering "Windows and Mirrors" – approaching diversity

We implemented the series *Heartstopper* in an elective class entitled 'English Literature' with 9th grade lower secondary students. After a first introduction to *Heartstopper*, we embedded Bishop's concept of texts being windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors (Bishop 1990). Bishop originally developed her argument in response to an observation from a classroom in which a boy with an African American background found it hard to engage with any of the picturebooks offered by the teacher since none of the main characters resembled him. From this observation, she developed her concept that books (or texts in a wide understanding of the term) have the power to function as windows into other worlds, or as sliding glass doors when we as readers (or viewers) imaginatively enter new worlds or, "when lighting conditions are just fine" (Bishop 1990, ix), they can also be mirrors and we can find ourselves reflected in the stories. In the student dossier, we included a quote from Bishop explaining these metaphors and linked it to a scene from the *Netflix* trailer of *Heartstopper*. In this scene, Charlie is

sitting on a bus next to his sister Tori on their way to school. The atmosphere is damp, and the bus windows are fogged up when Tori asks Charlie what kind of boy he would like to go out with. Charlie appears slightly overwhelmed before responding, *Just someone I can have a laugh with*. Absentmindedly, he wipes the fogged-up window, and through the now-clear glass, Nick Nelson becomes visible in the background.

Recognizing this visual moment in combination with Bishop’s metaphor created a moment of surprise for the students, which we used as a starting point for a short classroom discussion in which they described and interpreted the scene. Subsequently, students individually reflected on and recorded personal experiences in which a series, a film, or a book had functioned for them as a window into another world. Finally, they were invited to reflect on whether they had ever experienced such a window turning into a mirror, drawing on Allen’s idea that “media with mirrors have the potential to serve as developmental tools for students who are exploring a particular identity” (Allen 2023, 203).

To reconnect with the mirror concept, we began the following lesson with a short warm-up game using mirror words derived from cinematographic terminology that had already been introduced earlier (see Figure 2) where the students received either the word or its mirrored version and they had to find their partner. We then embodied the metaphor through a mirroring exercise borrowed from drama pedagogy: students faced each other as if looking into a mirror, with one student leading a sequence of movements that the partner had to mirror. After a short time, the roles were switched. Observing the students during this physical activity proved insightful for us. Some students were visibly shy and restrained, reproducing only the movements we had initially modelled during the demonstration. As pairs were formed randomly, students were deliberately mixed no matter which gender, and several students worked with partners they might not have chosen themselves. Despite this initial hesitation, the activity had a lasting impact. In the post-project discussion, one student explicitly referred back to this mirroring task as a positive and memorable moment of the project.

In the group discussions after the project, we returned to the concept of series functioning as *windows* and *mirrors* when collecting students’ attitudes towards *Heartstopper*. Overall, a clear divide emerged between the majority of students who expressed positive responses to the series (e.g. “very good,” “interesting,” “exciting,” “something new”) or neutral positions (e.g. “I had already watched it,” “okay,” “generally fine”), and a small number of students who reacted negatively.

In each implementation cycle, one student explicitly voiced their dislike of the series: *I didn’t like the series because it wasn’t really the kind of topic I usually watch. And I often felt uncomfortable because of some of the scenes. It was just a bit too much* (Cycle 2, Group 3, Pos. 12; our translation). Feelings of discomfort were also mentioned by students who otherwise evaluated the series positively, particularly in relation to specific scenes: *There are very strange situations in many scenes where you just don’t know how to react* (Cycle 2, Group 2, Pos. 21–23; our translation). As we found out, the students referred to scenes depicting physical intimacy between the two male protagonists, such as kissing. These reactions underline that for them, *Heartstopper* remained primarily a window into unfamiliar experiences, occasionally accompanied by feelings of irritation or discomfort.

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Mirror words - Find your partner / rentrap ruoy dnif
 Decipher/read your word – walk around and find the person who has your mirror word – you are not allowed to use the word itself → describe what it means.
 Example: panel → lenap

screenplay	<u>yalpneercs</u>
director	<u>rotcerid</u>
film crew	<u>werc mlif</u>
series	<u>seires</u>
camera angle	<u>elgna aremac</u>
protagonist	<u>tsinogatorp</u>
heartstopper	<u>reppotstraeh</u>
graphic novel	<u>levon cihparg</u>
medium shot	<u>toh2 muibem</u>

Fig. 3
Mirror Words

2 In television series, specific color palettes are often used as part of the series’ visual identity. In *Heartstopper*, light yellow and light blue are prominent colors (e.g., the Netflix promotional poster for Season 1). These colors are part of the series’ visual design and are not intended to reference Ukraine or convey a political message.

Terminology is key – Moving between BICS and CALP

In the second implementation cycle, even more consciously than in the first, we placed a strong emphasis on fostering students' visual and series_serial literacy. Tasks such as *"Analysing the color code"* used throughout the series proved to be genuine eye-openers for many students.² Once they became aware that the series is visually framed by a recurring palette of light blue and light yellow, they began to recognize these colors across numerous scenes. Students noticed, for example, how the color scheme appears in the corridors of Truham Grammar School, where the two protagonists repeatedly encounter each other, in the characters' clothing, and – most iconically – in the final episode of season 1, where the boys' beach towels pick up these colors. In addition, we analyzed

literacy as framing elements and which could be easily transferred to series_serial literacy. BICS were activated when students described scenes, wrote diary entries, or related to the protagonists' emotions etc. In these tasks, they relied largely on existing vocabulary and grammatical structures, which were selectively expanded through scene-specific lexical input. At the same time, developing students' visual and series_serial literacy also required CALP in the form of cinematographic and graphic novel terminology. Beyond noticing visual features such as color codes, students needed linguistic resources to name and describe what they perceived. We therefore repeatedly referred to cinematographic aspects such as camera angles and shot types and encouraged students to apply this terminology in productive tasks. For instance, when creating their own storyboards, students were asked to specify the camera angles and shot types they would use (Mat. 2).

To further support the acquisition of this terminology, we introduced a memory game in the second cycle consisting of two complementary worksheets: one focusing on cinematographic terms (e.g. medium shot, bird's-eye view, establishing shot), and the other on graphic-novel terminology (e.g. panel, speech balloon, gutter) which we needed for a comparison task. Matching the terms with corresponding visuals – we used scenes from *Heartstopper* – invited students to actively negotiate meanings and to cross-check their understanding using the reference worksheets included in their dossiers.

Although many terms were not retained in full, several students recalled this activity during the final group discussions, suggesting that it had a lasting impact. One student reflected: *We also looked at the different camera angles, such as the bird's-eye view and others whose names I can't remember exactly. I learned the terms used to describe the different perspectives and from which angle something is filmed. I also realized what a big difference it makes which perspective a scene is shot from* (Cycle 2, Group 1, Pos. 100; our translation).

Acquiring film-specific terminology also proved relevant for the broader theme of diversity that underpins *Heartstopper*. When students become more aware of how particular scenes are constructed and have the vocabulary to describe

"We analyzed how the rainbow colors associated with the LGBTQ+ movement are employed in several scenes, visually reinforcing the series' emphasis on diversity and inclusion."

how the rainbow colors associated with the LGBTQ+ movement are employed in several scenes, visually reinforcing the series' emphasis on diversity and inclusion. Across both cycles, students explicitly referred to the color-code activity as particularly memorable and meaningful, as illustrated by the following comment: *...you know, when we looked at the colors. As I already said earlier, I found that interesting* (Cycle 1, Pos. 215).

One key insight from the first implementation cycle was that working with a television series requires students to draw on both Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (see Cummins 2008) which Viebrock (2016, 17) had already included in her model of film

cinematographic and visual elements, they are better able to articulate how these influence them as viewers. In this way, CALP in the domain of film and series analysis helps learners move beyond intuitive reactions and discuss more precisely how visual choices shape their perceptions of diversity.

‘Why am I like this?’ – Focus on Nick’s inner struggles

In season 1 of *Heartstopper*, the narrative centers on Nick and Charlie’s gradual movement towards becoming a couple and recognizing one another as partners. For Charlie, the central challenge is not to know that he is interested in Nick, but rather to overcome the fear that Nick – whom he perceives as straight – will not be open to a relationship. Nick, by contrast, undergoes a different developmental process: he begins to question his self-concept as a straight rugby player, gradually realizing that he may be bisexual and that his feelings for Charlie offer an opportunity to explore his own (sexual) identity. Early in the series, Nick’s mother remarks that he seems most like himself when he is with Charlie without yet being aware of the special chemistry between the boys.

We repeatedly worked with Nick’s identity process in class. One key moment is the scene following a movie night with Charlie, during which Nick feels a strong impulse to take Charlie’s hand. Confronted with these feelings, Nick decides to seek information and support online (Mat. 4: “Help!” – Nick’s research on the Internet). To strengthen the analytical potential of this scene, we worked with both the graphic novel and the television series, comparing how each medium represents Nick’s inner turmoil through its specific means.

Our starting point was the graphic novel. Students first examined an almost wordless double spread (pp. 188–189) depicting Nick’s arrival at home after the movie night and his hesitation before searching the internet. The students were asked to comment on Nick’s emotional state and to speculate about what he might type into his laptop. On the subsequent double page, students focused on a striking visual composition on page 191: a close-up of Nick’s

confused face surrounded by fragmented panels containing search phrases such as “Am I gay?” or “The gay test.” Students discussed how they interpreted this visualization and the effect it had on them as readers. For the next double spread (pp. 192–193), students worked in pairs with cut-up panels provided in an envelope. This is a typical task when working with graphic novels, drawing attention to how panels, the individual framed images in graphic narratives, are connected, as well as how meaning emerges from the gutters, the spaces between panels. The scene visually represents the passage of time from 11 p.m. to 3 a.m. Although we kept the clocks and panels together to offer some scaffolding, students still needed time to negotiate the sequencing and discuss alternative arrangements before they agreed on their solution. To conclude Nick’s search, students read the final two pages (pp. 194–195), which

“The song by Orla Gartland, especially the chorus “Why am I like this?”, resonates as Nick’s own question and intensifies the affective dimension by engraving itself into the viewers’ minds and ears.”

depict his attempt to fall asleep and culminate in his desperate plea for help. Students selected those adjectives from a list we provided which for them best captured Nick’s emotional state. Finally, we drew attention to how Alice Oseman introduces a visual counterpoint of hope: the recurring leaf motif, also used in the series, which signals reassurance and emotional support, reappears at the end of the scene and offers a moment of (visual) relief.

In the TV series, this scene is split across two episodes – the end of episode 2 and the beginning of episode 3 which creates a cut and a cliffhanger. Our initial instruction was: *Watch the first scene without sound (S1:E2, 26:00–28:30). Note down what happens.*

In my opinion, the...

From my perspective, the... is more powerful because...

What I like best about... is that...

I prefer... because...

Textbox:

Language support for comparing the graphic novel with the series

- 3 Compare the two scenes in the serial with the pages in the graphic novel (p. 188-195).
Fill in the table.

	serial	graphic novel
Nick's feelings		
- sad / crying	- tears in Nick's eyes	- "sniff"
-	-	-
-	-	-
internet search		
-	-	-
-	-	-
-	-	-
time		
-	-	-
-	-	-
-	-	-
colors / lighting		
-	-	-
-	-	-
-	-	-
camera shots		
-	-	-
-	-	-
-	-	-
your idea:		
-	-	-
-	-	-
-	-	-

Fig. 4

Chart "Comparing the graphic novel and the series" (material from Mayer/ Schwarz 2025, reproduced with permission of Narr Francke Attempto Verlag GmbH + Co. KG.)

Although this scene closely parallels the corresponding episode in the graphic novel, the visual realization differs markedly in terms of camera shots, angles, and editing. In the series, viewers are shown more explicitly what appears on Nick's laptop screen, while the camera repeatedly zooms in on his distressed face. In a second viewing, students watched the scene with sound, which significantly altered their reception. The song by Or-la Gartland, especially the chorus "Why am I like this?", resonates as Nick's own question and intensifies the affective dimension by engraving itself into the viewers' minds and ears. This leaves a powerful impression and deepens empathy for Nick, who struggles to make sense of his unexpected feelings for Charlie, which challenge his previously established self-perception.

We then moved on to the second part of the sequence at the beginning of episode 3 (S1:E3, 0:00–1:22) and asked the students to compile a list of aspects they found particularly striking. The final task involved a systematic comparison of the graphic novel and the television series, with a focus on the different means of visual storytelling employed in each medium. Students were encouraged to use as much of the cinematographic and graphic-novel terminology as possible when completing the comparison chart (Fig. 4). Finally, we invited them to reflect on and discuss their personal preferences regarding the series and the graphic novel, supported by language support (see textbox).

Concluding thoughts

Our approach to embedding the series *Heartstopper* in the EFL classroom is grounded in the conviction that working with an audiovisual medium such as a TV series requires a deliberate combination of different task types. On the one hand, this includes language-based activities – such as writing a diary entry from a character's perspective or developing short roleplays in which students primarily draw on their Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS). On the other hand, tasks that focus on students' perception and analysis of visual and cinematographic design elements call for the use of technical terms, thus activating Cognitive Academic Language

Proficiency (CALP). In addition, our approach deliberately integrates creative design tasks that allow students to apply and experiment with what they have perceived, i.e. when creating storyboards or comparing a scene from the graphic novel with its adaptation in the series. Moving back and forth between these linguistic, analytical, and design-oriented tasks proved to be a productive way of developing students' visual and series_ serial literacy and to introduce them to dealing with LGBTQ+-related issues in the ELT classroom.

Working with *Heartstopper*, a series that is sometimes criticized for presenting queer relationships in an idealized or simplistic manner, nevertheless proved to be an adequate role model for conveying a positive image of diversity issues such as LGBTQ+ representation and for illustrating author Alice Oseman's intention for *Heartstopper* as "Just one normal relationship between two people" (Oseman on Tumblr). While some students struggled with watching intimate scenes

between the two male protagonists or explicitly rejected LGBTQ+-related topics (*So for me, it's not important in that sense. I mean, I think you don't have to see it – I don't want to see it, and I don't need to see it either.* Cycle 1, Pos. 79; our translation), we considered it crucial that the series offered windows or even mirrors to all of them and encouraged our students to reflect on their own preconceptions and broaden their perspectives. Because we were able to connect the series to students' personal experiences as well as to concrete aspects of visual storytelling, diversity emerged as a central, yet not exclusive, dimension of the project. One student captured this particularly well when stating:

Well, I really liked the series, and I felt that it was kind of made for everyone. It was more a series with teenagers in it and also intended for teenagers, [...]; it's not made just for one group, but rather for everyone – for all young people – and that's why I liked it so much (Cycle 2, Group 1, pos. 10, our translation).

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