

# Using Children's and Youth Literature in German as a Foreign Language Courses

-- Take Stephen Zweig's *The Burning Secret* as an Example

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**Abstract:** The use of literature in the teaching of foreign languages has always led to heated debates. The function and implementation practices of literature in foreign language teaching have long been studied from a variety of perspectives, including the types of materials used, i.e. the literary texts employed. Children's and youth literature has always attracted the attention of foreign language educators, thus stimulating controversial questions about the legitimacy, potential or procedures of using children's and youth literature in the GFL courses. The story of the conflict between a 12-year-old and an adult in Stefan Zweig's long novel *The Burning Secret*, and the child's inner grief in the conflict, always makes me think about this content. In this essay, I will therefore deal with a few guiding questions such as such as "Does *Burning Secrets* belong to children's and youth literature?", "To what extent does *Burning Secrets* belong to children's and youth literature?" and "to what extent can *Burning Secrets* be evaluated as children's and youth literature in German as a foreign language courses?". This essay will ultimately prove that through the authentic reception phase with the film and the personal playing in the roles of the story, the reading competence-oriented GFL courses can be well complemented and extended with creative and independent work by learners.

**Keywords:** GFL courses, Children's and Youth Literature, *Burning Secret*. Teaching suggestions, Stefan Zweig, novella.

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## 1. Introduction

Even for native speakers, reading a long narrative, even a whole novel is not without problems, then how will foreign language learners react in front of foreign language literature? Afraid? Therefore, no more desire to read or willing to be motivated again? Foreign language didactics with literary texts always brings an exciting discussion. The functions and implementation practices of literary didactics in foreign language teaching have long been studied from various perspectives, among which the variety of teaching materials used, i.e. the literary texts employed. However, children's and youth literature as a "classic" variety, although not in the focus, always attracts the attention of foreign language educators and pedagogues, and on it stimulates controversial questions concerning the legitimacy, potential, or procedure of using children's and young adult literature in GFL classes.

From the point of view of many teachers, the use of children's and young people's literature, especially the whole work in foreign language teaching really needs venture. (cf. Dominique Lafargue 1999: 14.)

Normally, many German textbooks contain only short excerpts from literary works and rarely allow learners to systematically read an entire story or novel in class. In addition, teachers' consideration of the age differences of learners constitutes precisely the uncertainty in lesson planning that comes with the introduction of CYL.

The conflicting story in Stefan Zweig's novella "*Burning Secret*" between a 12-year-old and adults and the child's inner grief during the conflict always lead me to reflect within this framework.

Although Stefan Zweig never belonged to the typical classics of children's and youth literature, there have always

been writers who have written children's and youth literature, historically or now, even though they have been known as writers of adult literature or vice versa, and this tendency even increases, which just contributes to the fact that children's and young people's literature is more and more included in the category of overall literature. (Cf. Hans-Heino Ewers 2000: 9)

In this work, I will therefore deal with a few guiding questions such as such as "Does *Burning Secrets* belong to children's and youth literature", "To what extent does *Burning Secrets* belong to children's and youth literature?" and "to what extent can *Burning Secrets* be evaluated as children's and youth literature in German as a foreign language courses".

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. What is children's and youth literature?

If we start from the aspect of addressees, children's and youth literature could be oriented to the groups from infants to adolescents to young adults. (cf. Emer O'Sullivan/Dietmar Rösler 2002 : 68)

If the CYL is considered in the didactic framework according to some differentiations from children's and youth literature research, which is fair to the existing texts as well as to the teachers and learners, three groups can be distinguished from each other: "the intentional CYL", under which all that children and adolescents should read according to the ideas of adults such as parents, teachers, publishers and critics; "the specific CYL", which as the prototype of the CYL of today developed only in the 18th century and is written specifically for children and/or adolescents from the beginning century and written from the beginning specifically for children's and/or young people's reading; "the children's and young people's reading" that is actually read by children and young people. (cf. Emer O'Sullivan/Dietmar Rösler 2002 :

67)

If children's and adolescent literature is considered in a pedagogical framework based on a number of distinctions in the study of children's and adolescent literature that are fair to both existing texts and to teachers and learners, three groups can be distinguished: 'intentional children's and adolescent literature', under which everything that children and adolescents should read according to adults such as parents, teachers, publishers and critics is thought to fall; 'specific children's and juvenile literature', as the prototype for today's children's and young adult literature, developed only in the 18th century and was written specifically for children and/or young adults from the beginning. 'Specific CYL', as a prototype for today's CYL, developed only in the 18th century and was written specifically for children and/or young people from the beginning; 'Children's and Young People's Reading', which was actually read by children and young people. (cf. Emer O'Sullivan/Dietmar Rösler 2002 : 67)

If we continue to look at the broad spectrum of themes, motifs and genres of children's and youth literature, a plethora of different genres, each of which could be oriented to different ages, levels of difficulty and aesthetic demands, still appear before our eyes. The picture book, children's poetry, the fairy tale, the fantastic children's and youth narrative, the realistic children's book, the girls' book, detective story, the adventure book, the animal book, the adolescent novel, the religious children's and youth book, comics, children's and youth theater, children's and youth literature multimedia (e.g., CYL on film/video or from audio books) as well as children's and youth magazines etc. Within the framework of the overall presentation of the field of children's and young adult literature, it is possible to include, for example, children's and young adult magazines in a broader context.

The arguments for the questionable use of children's and young people's literature in foreign language teaching are, for example, as follows: With the little teaching time available, the use of CYL would displace a canonised text. It would not meet the reading needs of adult teachers or probably not be appropriate from an aesthetic point of view. In the eyes of some language educators, CYL should even be excluded from proper literature.

On the other hand, due to its themes, scope and linguistic peculiarities, CYL may be seen as something "topical" that offers young learners "points of connection" or "possibilities of identification". (Daniela Caspari/Helga Schiller 1996: 4)

Within the framework of children's and youth education, linguistic knowledge and subjectivising aesthetic skills, which are often neglected in general educational standards, are promoted. (cf. Decke-Cornill/Gebhard 2007: 11)

Because of its simplicity and its appropriateness for children and young people, CYL could be introduced into didactics as beginner's literature and thus serve as a progression from elementary to complex literary procedures for the acquisition of literature. (cf. Ewers 2000: 250)

Through storytelling and reading aloud, children and young people should become familiar with new, especially written, literary language material. Aesthetic perception, subjective understanding (e.g. empathy and the ability to recognise something foreign in their own and something foreign in their own) can be systematically trained and promoted through repeated readings, interactive discussions in class and integrated tasks. Can be systematically trained and promoted. (cf. Deck-Cornill/Gebhard 2007: 22)

Children and adolescents also use reading to distance

themselves from their parents. Reading serves them as a means of regulating relationships, with which they obtain attention on the one hand, and on the other hand also immerse themselves in the stories and fates of their peers.

The application possibilities of CYL are not exhausted by this. Also for young adults learning foreign languages, even adults with different backgrounds, etc.

## **2.2. Children's and Youth Literature in German as a Foreign Language Classes**

### **2.2.1. Why should children's and young people's literature be used for literacy-oriented GFL courses?**

"Promoting reading in the context of children's and young people's literature is also promoting literature" and it "includes making use of all opportunities for influence and employment aimed at promoting engagement with the print media (book, newspaper, magazine) among children and young people in order to develop, build up and deepen reading motivation and the joy of reading". (Manfred Marquardt 2005: 8)

In comparison to pure textbook texts and other groups of literary works, a few functions of German children's and young people's literature as reading in GFL courses for reading promotion can be identified, e.g. how the intensity of feelings can be harnessed for young learners, how reading experiences can be made possible through reception-aesthetic work. When it comes to concrete practice, there are also quite a few examples: "Intercultural understanding with multicultural youth novels, the use of the picture book in the early phase of foreign language learning, action- and reception-oriented handling of an adolescent novel among young learners" (Bredella/Burwitz-Melzer 2004), etc.

### **2.2.2. Which criteria for the selection of CYL for GFL courses are to be particularly considered?**

Generally speaking, the CYL used in GFL courses should be selected depending on the learning objectives and the target group of the lesson. Although age-specific addressing is not necessarily required in every case, I recommend in principle the use of CYL depending on the different topics and difficulties in the GFL courses for child learners to young adult learners (up to approx. 30 years), so that a connection of the literature to the everyday life of the learners could be made possible. When discussing the selection criteria in terms of language level and content, they should, for example, not be a frustrating overload, stimulate curiosity and the desire to discover, adapt to didactic use, etc. (cf. Hans-Jürgen Krumm: 2001: 26)

Narrative texts such as novels and novellas also have "a plot-rich course, contrasting constellations of characters, profound characters and the intention of the main characters, authentic language" (Ilona Feld-Knapp 2002: 34), which provides learners with the opportunity for identification and distancing, especially in reading competence-oriented GFL courses. For this reason, the type of text and its thematic suitability for further instruction must be taken into account in the selection process. In addition, the scope and structure of the novel or novella, which are suitable for didactic purposes, also play a major role.

## **3. The Author and The Work**

### **3.1. "The Hunter of the Heart": Stefan Zweig**

With numerous world-renowned literary works, the

Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, of Jewish origin, is considered one of the literary figures of the 20th century who are particularly excellent in describing the interior of humanity: in the early days of the previous century, Stefan Zweig was considered neither totally peculiar nor outdated because of the striking, literary style. On the one hand, his works spring from the background of Western culture and reality; on the other hand, he has unprecedentedly placed the emphasis of description on the analysis of the human psyche. (cf. Joseph P. Strelka 1982: 45)

Romain Rolland has called him the "hunter of the heart" (Rolland 1966: 307-325), and we could speak of the forerunner of "psychic realism" (Rolland 1966: 307-325) in connection with him.

Stefan Zweig's works are world-famous for profound descriptions of the inner self, elegance of language and artistic impact, and intricate plots. and of these, several exemplary novellas and stories in particular, characterised by poetic language, dramatic narrative style and not least the in-depth psychoanalysis of the characters, are popular with readers from all over the world. (cf. Strelka 1982: 46)

### **3.2. Brief introduction to the novella collection First Experience: Four stories from Kinderland**

As early as 1904, Stefan Zweig published a volume of four novellas (*Die Liebe der Erika Ewald*), but then turned to poetry (*Die frühen Kränze*, 1906) and drama (*Tersites*, 1907) alongside his monograph on Émile Verhaeren, altogether without resounding success. In 1911, he published a full-length collection of *First Experience, Four stories from Kinderland*, with which he returned to prose.

In addition to *Burning Secret*, this volume of novellas contains the novellas *Story at Dawn*, *The Governess* and *Summer Novelette*. The novellas focus on the world of the child's psyche and its early pubertal impulses, which Freud undertook to analyse in his writings. The fact that the four novellas share the same striking aspect, namely that readers are presented with the erotic and lascivious atomic sphere of the adult world through the "eyes" of pubescent children, is proof that this volume of novellas serves as a reminder of Zweig's childhood and adolescence and as the earliest attempt at the literary application of Freud's theory. (cf. Leszek Dziemianko 2000: 5-6)

When the Viennese psychologist Sigmund Freud, at the turn of the century, established the concepts and theory of libido, prefeeling, subconscious, the tense primordial relationship between father and son, Zweig both witnessed and participated in Freud's sensational revolutionary theories, while the large part of the society of that time could not yet accept them (cf. Leszek Dziemianko 2000: 5-6).

From this volume of novellas onwards, Zweig placed great emphasis on the inner world and psychology of people in his novellas and stories, including some novels. (cf. Leszek Dziemianko 2000: 5-6)

In my opinion, such works are almost trivial literature and have neither complicated historical background nor sophisticated themes, but always simply around a focus - the mental state and mystery of mankind, such as the erotic affects in confusion of feelings; the shock of the twelve-year-old when he begins to suspect the burning mystery of adults.

### **3.3. Summary of the content and specificity of the novella *Burning Secret*.**

The novella *Burning Secret* is about the confrontation of the sheltered, sickly boy Edgar with the fact that his seductive mother has a "burning secret," an affair with an easy-going baron. The main plot goes like this: A young baron on vacation at the Austrian Semmering fears a less than pleasant time upon his arrival and becomes very bored. Neither acquaintances nor interesting women are present. But then he notices a slightly older but still beautiful woman with her 12-year-old son in the dining room. The 12-year-old Edgar is spending a spa stay there with his mother because he needs to recover from a long-term illness. In order to get in touch with the mother, he befriends the child and is immediately idolized by him. In this way he also gets into conversation with the mother and as his interest and zeal for each other increases, both become less and less interested in the boy. Edgar reacts to the rejection with hatred and rejection and decides not to let the two out of his sight anymore in order to get behind their secret. The situation comes to a head more and more. After the violent confrontation, Edgar takes off. But finally he reconciles with his mother at his grandmother's and even helps her to conceal the secret from his father.

This novella is divided into 15 parts, each of which has a subtitle, namely *The Partner*, *Rapid Friendship*, *Tercet*, *Attack*, *The Elephants*, *Skirmish*, *Burning Secret*, *Silence*, *The Liars*, *Traces in the Moonlight*, *The Raid*, *Thunderstorm*, *First Insight*, *Confusing Darkness*, *The Last Dream*.

The full-length novel soon found its readership, and according to statistics, in its first year of publication, the single-volume circulation had reached 10,000 copies.

Contemporary critics praised the novella. Other well-known writers, such as Hermann Hesse, also held it in very high esteem.

Over the next few years, the long novel also saw a growing circulation, with a print run of 170,000 copies, until 1933 when his work was included in the list of books to be burned by the Nazis. (See Alfred Pfessor 1981: 8)

### **4. In What Context or To What Extent Is *Burning Secret* to Be Evaluated as CYL?**

What is interesting about this long novel in terms of narrative is that the narrator's interest lies not in this relationship between two adults, but in the inner movement and cognitive process of the child who, after an initial budding and a phase of psychological obstacles and rejection, is finally able to mentally grasp and accept the mysterious relationship of the adult world. The author casts his eyes on the psychological changes and sensitive descriptions of Edgar's step into the adult world between dream and reality, which was new at the time, almost a century ago. He hit the current of the time, just as Sigmund Freud and Arthur Schnitzler, who were his contemporaries at the time, did in Vienna. (cf. Lou Andreas-Salomé : 1925)

The intergenerational conflict between the rules of boys and adults, even to the point of physical confrontation, can be interpreted as a metaphor for the transition from the established social order on the eve of the First World War to the new century. (cf. Achim Küpper 2009: 17-40).

Indeed, the extraordinary, intuitive psychological acuity displayed in these longer stories is also evident in the other

three stories in the longer collection *Erstes Erleben*. The Four Stories of the Kindergarten and several of Zweig's works dominate with impressive clarity, whether in the mental turmoil of *Amokläufer* and *Verwirrung der Gefühle*, or in the old man's unusual enthusiasm for his *Invisible Collection*.

Zweig's reasons or 'hidden' motives for writing this long novel have always been unclear, with one of the most famous suspicious hints having to do with the political situation of the time: In March 1933, the film version of *The Burning Secret* was released in cinemas. Since the title offered much cause for ridicule in view of the Reichstag fire, further screenings of the film were banned. (cf. Matuschek 2006)

Although this was neither written by a "classical CYL" literary figure nor as specific CYL, the work's excellent characteristics in relation to the inner world of children and adolescents - especially adolescents in pre-puberty or puberty - make it look attractive in terms of literary didactic implications.

The book sensitively describes the problems of a twelve-year-old with the adult world. Stefan Zweig knows very well how to give a moral picture of the time. For a better understanding, a quotation serves: "Terrible to be a child, full of curiosity and yet not allowed to ask anyone, to always be ridiculous in front of these grown-ups, as if one were something stupid or useless. But I will know, I feel I will know now, soon." (Stefan Zweig 1987: 56)

Zweig goes far into the depths of their motivations in his description of the child, but also of the baron, and clearly shows both vulnerability and thoughtless exploitation. The fatal effect of adults' careless, rather than malicious, treatment of children is the main motive to which the author obviously points with all clarity.

With regard to the linguistic level, this novella is also characterised by numerous relatively short and simple sentences, especially in the form of a lot of the childish monologues that young Edgar never dares to express, because of its peculiar perspective between the constellation of characters. Even the descriptive language, e.g. in the case of the landscape, although on the one hand brought to the literarily sophisticated level by the classical writer, on the other hand is also quite concise and poetic in accordance with German grammar and usage norms. This is also reflected by the publication of the bilingual book: "Stefan Zweig: *Burning Secret* and *The Marriage of Lyon* (German-Chinese) - Series of Famous Pieces of Literature from German-Speaking Countries".

## 5. Teaching Suggestions for *Burning Secret* in GFL Courses

### 5.1. The book used and the target group

The book I recommend to Chinese learners of German as a teaching material is the bilingual (German-Chinese) version of *Burning Secret* and the Chinese translation, which retains the narrative style and linguistic beauty of the original, was created by the famous Germanist and translator, Professor Zhang, Yushu at Peking University. Two texts of the source and target language are printed one after the other in the parallel page number. As a full text, this novella can be read with adolescents and young adults who have been learning German as a foreign language for at least 2 to 3 years, or selected chapters of it can be read as an excerpt in GFL courses for students between 15 and 17 years old with a language level of at least level B2. Depending on the class

group and level, the work with the whole text could last 20 to 30 courses. In addition, home reading with reading aid (e.g. the parallel Chinese translation or dictionary) after class is also recommended.

### 5.2. Methodological approaches

From the introduction of this novella and the criteria at the front of the paper, we can come to the conclusion that *Burning Secret* is suitable for literacy-oriented GFL courses. The exciting plot in this story and the narrative style of Stefan Zweig arouse the interest of the reader, while the difficulties presented for an adolescent to find his way in the adult world bring back many memories of his own growing-up puzzles. of their own coming-of-age conundrums. Moreover, this novella, which is not large in scope, is structured into 15 small chapters with keyword-like intertitles, which not only allows reading expectations to build up, but can also much more easily ensure systematic work with each chapter or the combination of several chapters in class.

Approach with regard to the novella itself: In the novella, two focal points are conspicuous, firstly, the young protagonist's lively changes in behaviour or interiority, for example, in connection with adolescent psychology; secondly, the word "secret" is not only the central word in the title, but also appears repeatedly in the novella, passes through and also develops in parallel in or with the plot, which makes it stand out as the key word of the novella, since it serves to develop the plot and deepen the leitmotif. Therefore, learners may say while reading that the term "mystery" is a symbolising object rather than a literal entity and appears as "the hidden main character".

On the basis of these motivating insights, the discussion with learners about "secret" could go further in this direction to find out the functions and the meaning of the essence of "secret" for the novella or its motif and at the same time try to analyse comparatively superficially what the relationship between "secret" and the main characters is. Procedure with regard to the teaching process:

Longer novellas are complex texts. The teaching work must be systematically structured step by step, e.g. as follows (cf. Liesel Hermes 1981)

1. preparation and motivation phase
2. working on the text (interim discussion, discussion of reading experiences, comprehension check, assignment and final discussion, etc.)
3. dramatisation and performance (optional)

## 6. Conclusion

The author brings the age of the young protagonist Edgar to life powerfully, colourfully and pleasantly vividly by drawing a vivid picture of the individual developmental steps and their dangers. The plot of the novella is therefore both exciting and transparent. Around the title word "Burning Secret", Edgar's developmental process from being a child to becoming an adult is paralleled with the development of the "secret" in his heart. In my opinion, the teacher should slowly approach the essential content of "Burning Secret" or its symbolic meaning, otherwise there will be great difficulties. The objects of text editing could be concentrated on the behaviour of the young main character, which is strange to adults, or on the change in relationships.

In the preparation and motivation phase, a motivational talk could first be held among learners to collect experiences. Questions such as "what things or memories in your

childhood come to mind when you hear the word mystery?" could be asked so that learners' attention is quickly drawn to the novella through free discussion and their curiosity is aroused. At the same time, preparation work should be carried out in close connection with motivational work. In doing so, the learners are familiarised with necessary linguistic competences such as vocabulary, grammatical structures in order to let the learners participate in the intensive reading and the far-reaching elaboration.

Then, introduce the heading of each chapter to facilitate entry into the thread of the novella's main plot. Alternatively, learners may still select a few chapters at each heading for further work according to their interest and curiosity, so that they can help shape their courses and will feel like learning subjects rather than learning objects. (cf. Hanne Geist: 2002: 42)

An in-depth study of the long story can be done from different aspects. Aspect 1: The structure and plot of a long novel. Teachers ask learners to identify the following ideas from the text in each chapter based on a quick read-through: Chapters and corresponding page numbers; main characters; location of events; relationships of characters to each other or development of relationships; conflicts and turning points; the prognosis of further actions. These points are to be put into a table as elements, which the learners can fill out in the form of individual work. When checking the results later, the learners could be divided into groups of three or four, in which a summary of the content for each chapter is prepared as an enrichment of the heading after joint discussion and then formulated in plenary.

Aspect 2: Characterisation of the characters In this activity, learners should assess the main characters of the novella according to their characteristics and deeds or their developments. There are three main characters in this novella, Edgar, Edgar's mother and Baron. The presentation of these characters and their dramatic relationships with each other proceeds around the key word "mystery". In the plenary discussion, the changes in the relationship between each of the two character constellations and the corresponding behaviour of each character as well as the consequences should be collected on the board. Here, a contrastive treatment with several chapters is exciting: e.g. through a sequential analysis from chapter 2 (Quick Friendship) to chapter 4 (Attack), the childishness of Edgar and his curiosity and hungry pining for the adult world are illustrated in comparison to the cunning and reckless behaviour of the young Baron. Also interesting is the considerable amount of Edgar's monologues in the last 3 chapters (First Insight, Confusing Darkness, The Last Dream). Reading and reading aloud such parts could not only further sensitise learners to the German language, but also make the characterisation and the process of development of the hero's inner self on the threshold from childhood to adulthood more clear.

In the open plenary discussion, encourage learners to use acquired expressions and idioms to take a personal stand on issues in everyday life in relation to the novella, so as to create an opportunity for learners to identify, e.g.: "The issue of immorality can be seen most clearly in the Baron's behaviour towards Edgar, if you consider the pretence of friendship as immoral. What do you think is the morality for a friendship? How would you react if you also encounter pretence in a

friendship?" or "Whether the mother-child conflicts as depicted in the novella can be found in everyday life?" By using the foreign language, a certain distancing from one's own problems would be supplied, which could also give learners the courage and willingness to speak more freely about daily affairs with their own experiences. (Cf. Feld-Knapp 2002: 41) Watching the film version of this novella together, even dramatising and performing it with young learners themselves is recommended. An extra 2-3 courses could be set aside for this. Through the authentic reception phase with the film and the personal playing in the roles of the story, the reading competence-oriented GFL courses can be well complemented and extended with creative and independent work by learners.

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