

# Planting Seeds of Imagination in the EFL Classroom, or the Challenges of Greening the Canon and the Curriculum

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## *Abstract*

While voices in language pedagogy agree on the potential of literary fiction to help children and young adults grapple with complex and global issues such as climate change, too little is being said about the tools and knowledge that teachers need to decide which books to read in class and to what end. Like anyone interested in teaching climate change-related works of fiction, EFL teachers are confronted with the challenging task to choose from a vast array of narrative texts dealing either explicitly or implicitly with the diverse symptoms and effects of the current environmental crisis. In this paper, I discuss insights from canon formation in children's literature and bring them into conversation with an ongoing research project at the Department of English II at the University of Cologne that aims at developing a toolkit for the selection and teaching of climate fiction in primary and secondary education. Using the example of the novel *Boy in the Tower* (2014) by Polly Ho-Yen, this paper presents results of the *Climate Fiction Lab*'s work and offers ideas on how to promote 'climate change literacy' (Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr 2023) in the context of a sustainability-oriented EFL classroom for learners aged 14 to 16.

Keywords: climate fiction; cli-fi lab; climate change literacy; plant horror; education for sustainable development

Climate change and biodiversity loss across the globe have been a growing concern for decades, which is why approaches to 'Education for Sustainable Development' (ESD) (UNESCO 2017) are increasingly being implemented in the curricula of all school subjects in Germany, including English as a foreign language (EFL). To achieve the cognitive, emotional and behavioural skills needed to respond to the pressing and intricate issue of the global environmental crisis, an almost overwhelming number of sustainability-related key competencies have been spelled out in an

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equally large number of national, as well as international, policy documents, including the German 'Education for Sustainable Development at Secondary Level' guide (Transfer-21 2007: 7), the 'Curriculum Framework ESD' (KMK 2016) and the 'Education for Sustainable Development Goals' (UNESCO 2017). Among these competencies one finds, for instance, what in the German-speaking context has been referred to as 'shaping competence', which is the 'the ability to engage in a thoughtful manner with sustainable development processes, personally and in cooperation with others, and to systematically analyse and assess unsustainable development processes' (Transfer-21 2007: 7). Taking a similar analytical learning objective as its basis, 'global competence' has been defined as 'the capacity to analyse global and intercultural issues critically and from multiple perspectives' (OECD 2016: 4). Relatedly, but with a greater focus on action-oriented and participatory learning, the widely cited set of 'competencies for sustainability' defines the attributes needed to 'collaborate, speak up and act for positive change' (UNESCO 2017: 10). What stands out in these competency descriptions is their fact-based and solutionist approach toward sustainability-oriented learning and their call for individual action, focusing on the acquisition of scientific knowledge and interpersonal skills needed to respond to the challenges posed by climate change.

An EFL teacher might be asking themselves at least two questions by now: which of these conceptual frameworks and curricular suggestions do I take as a basis for my lesson planning and what role does language and literary learning play in education for sustainable development? Indeed, teachers have to work through the aforementioned mass of policy documents all by themselves and are left alone with their decision on how and for what purpose to integrate environmental issues into their English lessons. Adding to this, the significance of language and literature pedagogy in exploring the cultural dimensions of climate change through aesthetic and discursive encounters is still underrepresented in debates on the role of education for achieving a more sustainable present and future. The majority of available documents seem to agree that the value of literary and language education lies in facilitating the communication of complex socio-ecological issues related to global warming in a manner that is both engaging and emotionally appealing for learners. Such an instrumentalising view towards the arts and languages is, however, highly problematic, as it does not give credit to subjects such as English language

teaching (ELT), its objectives and the areas of expertise in which foreign language teachers have been trained. After all, ELT is more than merely the communicative and intercultural wing of the natural and life sciences when it comes to sustainability-oriented teaching and learning.

Recent work on humanities-centred concepts of literacy in (foreign) language learning contexts such as ‘climate change literacy’ (Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr 2023) or ‘futures literacy’ (Sipl, Brandhofer and Rauscher 2023) have therefore shifted their focus on the specific potentials of language and storytelling in grappling with the scalar and discursive complexities posed by the ‘super wicked problem’ (Lazarus 2009) of climate change. In this context, the literary genre of climate fiction or ‘cli-fi’ has been emphasised to be of particular interest for educators to provide language learners with an experience-oriented way of dealing with climate change through narrative. The obvious reason for this is to be found in the fact that works of climate fiction deal either explicitly or implicitly with the symptoms and effects of the current climate crisis and thus allow readers to draw connections between storyworlds and their own crisis-ridden present.

A look at the book market reveals a significant increase in the number of works of climate fiction available for consideration. For EFL teachers, this is both a blessing and a curse. While it offers a rich source of material, it makes the already challenging task of selecting age- and language-appropriate texts for use in heterogenous classrooms even more difficult. In order to be able to decide which works of climate fiction to read with learners and to what end, a focus on climate-related themes and motifs alone is clearly not enough. Rather than overemphasising climate fiction’s role as a thematic gateway to exploring precarious nature-culture interrelations through modes of representation and identification—what Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr (2023) call ‘the cognitive and the sentimental fallacy’ (13)—the focus needs to shift to the key strengths of literary language and narrative strategies.

This paper will elaborate on the transformative potential of literary writing for fostering ESD learning processes and present some of the critical tools that EFL teachers at all levels can use to assess and select a work of climate fiction with regard to the aesthetic and affective affordances provided by its content and form. Insights from canon formation in children’s literature as well as environmental literacy concepts will be discussed and brought into conversation with text

selection criteria, developed in an ongoing research project at the Department of English II at the University of Cologne called the *Climate Fiction Lab*. Using the example of the middle school novel *Boy in the Tower* (2014) by Polly Ho-Yen, this paper will present results of the *Climate Fiction Lab*'s work and suggest ideas on how to teach literary works in the context of a sustainability-oriented EFL classroom.

I will begin my analysis with carving out and presenting criteria that are supposed to help EFL teachers evaluate which fictional texts to read in class to both foster 'climate change literacy' (Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr 2023) and meet the curricular demands of their subject. To this end, I will apply a functional approach to canonicity (cf. Müller 2017) that assesses the quality of a literary text with regard to the kind of involvement with and development of cultural imaginaries and narratological practices its content and form allow for. In the context of climate fiction, this means evaluating how far and to what extent a literary text engages learners aesthetically and affectively with the socio-ecological complexities of the current global environmental crisis.

As I will argue, the sustainability-oriented EFL classroom needs to provide learning arrangements which enable learners to analyse, evaluate and creatively work with the very specific imaginaries of crisis, scalar and material entanglements and socio-ecological complexities offered by climate fiction to reach its main goal: fostering skills in the ESD competence fields of *Recognising* (i.e., gaining knowledge about the foreign language and how to use it in order to draw connections between the crisis-ridden present and speculative futures), *Assessing* (i.e., being able to analyse the effect of literary language on one's perspective on the present and possible climate futures) and *Acting* (i.e., experiencing one's agency in using language to voice and critically discuss different imaginaries of (un)sustainable futures) (cf. KMK 2016: 159).

In order to demonstrate how exactly the teaching of fiction can initiate ESD-related language and literary learning processes in these three competence areas, this paper will in a second step apply the previously developed theoretical insights to Polly Ho-Yen's *Boy in the Tower* (2014), which is available as both a full-length novel and an illustrated, extremely abbreviated version adapted for English language learners. I will be focusing on the original novel in my analysis to do justice to the full aesthetic and affective potential of this text. The novel's dystopian plant invasion narrative centres around a lonely boy who has to fight for his and

his agoraphobic mother's survival in an abandoned London tower block, surrounded and cut-off from the rest of the world by a new and deadly species of plants. As my analysis will show, the novel provides numerous points of entry into classroom discussions and activities revolving around ESD-related topics such as plant diversity, invasive species, global health, urban infrastructures and climate change. At the same time, the novel's accessible language and the focus on the themes of friendship, family, urban life and mental health makes it particularly apt to be taught in the EFL classroom at the lower secondary level (grades eight to ten) with learners of diverse abilities (aged 14–16 in the German school system).

Taking into account the three competence fields of ESD learning processes, I will then present a set of creative tasks and activities that support learners in developing the skills needed (1) to identify, understand and interpret the foreign literary language with regard to imaginaries of climate crisis presented in this novel (*Recognising*), (2) to form values, attitudes and opinions on the basis of the aesthetic and affective affordances of the work's content and form (*Assessing*) and (3) to use the foreign language in order to draw connections between imaginaries of crisis and their own lives and futures (*Acting*).

This paper closes with emphasising the importance of teacher education in putting the theoretical ideas and teaching suggestions outlined here into practice. The innovative format of the Cologne-based *Climate Fiction Lab* will be presented as a best-practice example to suggest ideas for how teachers can be supported in their important and demanding role as facilitators of environment-related literacy in a time of climate crisis.

#### *Climate fiction and the challenge of selection*

Given the urgency of the climate crisis, policy and curricular documents in the field of ESD agree that the ability to imagine, negotiate and communicate liveable futures is crucial for cultivating the resiliency needed to deal with global changes in the short and long run. What is also required of current and future generations is the ability to question and reflect on individual and social practices, norms and values that may possibly prevent humanity from moving towards desirable visions of the future. This necessitates an awareness of the intersectionality of climate change and an understanding of the multiple perspectives that need to be considered when trying to find adequate responses to this global challenge

(cf. UNESCO 2017: 9). Literary texts can support learners in developing these competencies because, as Bland (2018) puts it, they

afford wide educational benefits in addition to language benefits, for example intercultural understanding, empathy, multiple literacies and understanding of the connectedness of the world and global issues, tolerance, cognitive and affective gains and self-reliance. (1)

These benefits can be exploited in EFL classrooms with a focus on sustainability education through the teaching of climate fiction or ‘cli-fi’. In recent years, literary works that deal with climate change-related issues have become increasingly popular with researchers in the environmental humanities to make a case for the ecopedagogical potential of this new genre (Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr 2023; Bartosch 2019; Mayer and Wilson 2006). Climate fiction lacks a clear definition but may be loosely described with regard to its focus on the social, political, ethical, technological, intergenerational and psychological implications of climate change. Encompassing picture books, graphic novels, novellas, short stories, verse novels, playscripts and novels and drawing on the conventions of a variety of other genres such as science fiction, dystopia, satire and, in the case of young adult fiction, action-adventure, coming-of-age and fantasy, climate fiction appears as a meta-genre rather than a distinct mode of writing. As such, it can be understood as a ‘distinctive body of cultural work which engages with anthropogenic climate change, exploring the phenomenon not just in terms of setting, but with regard to psychological and social issues, combining fictional plots with meteorological facts, speculation on the future and reflection on the human-nature relationship’ (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 2019: 2). To complicate this already fuzzy definition even further, climate fiction must not necessarily deal with the direct symptoms and effects of climate change explicitly. Next to more or less realistic environmental risk narratives that draw a clear connection to the catastrophic consequences of global warming, one also finds works that present readers with fantastical or even horrific encounters with plants and animals to implicitly deal with climate change-related topics such as biodiversity loss and extinction.

EFL teachers are faced with the challenging task to navigate through this ever-growing body of climate fiction while simultaneously having to take into account various other factors relevant for selecting literature that

is apt to teach in their heterogenous learning groups (e.g., learner interests, diverse abilities and language skills, curricular standards and guidelines and price and availability of books). Alongside these practical considerations, one of the most important criteria to select climate fiction for the EFL classroom lies in a work's narrative composition and aesthetic quality, which according to Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr (2023) is connected to its capacity to engender '(1) discourse awareness (which includes ideas such as framing, scaling and foregrounding), (2) critical empathy (which focuses on perspective and identification [with protagonists]) and (3) systems thinking (which includes intersectionality and matters of justice [in relation to climate change])' (8). This is realised, they argue, by a work's 'language, rhetorical devices and narrative strategies' (26), which in narratological terms refers to the discourse specifics or the form of a text.

In the context of literary and language education, the specific potentials of a cli-fi work's language and form may foster 'climate change literacy': the ability to comprehend and make productive use of literary 'perceptions and understandings of [the] complexity and uncertainty' (Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr 2023: 4) connected to and coming with the issue of climate change. In other words, it is a literacy that allows learners to critically analyse, negotiate, communicate and engage with and respond to the irresolvable ambiguities presented to them by climate change through literary and aesthetic experience and the use of language in the communicative and action and production-oriented (foreign) language learning classroom. But how can one evaluate whether a work of fiction potentially possesses the kind of aesthetic and affective value needed to foster climate change literacy and is thus suitable to teach within the sustainability-oriented EFL classroom? I suggest that a functional approach to aesthetic evaluation, which takes into account both a text's discourse specifics and imaginaries of environmental crisis, offers a promising starting point for this selection process.

I argue with Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr (2023) that it is necessary to assess not only *what* but, more importantly, *how* a work of climate fiction narrates climate change (26). For this purpose, let us first look at the 'social imaginaries' of climate change, that is, the assumptions, beliefs and expectations underlying collectively shared 'images, stories, and legends' (Taylor 2003: 23) of this phenomenon. This will allow us to identify the cultural and narratological practices and 'orders' that cli-fi works invite

and represent (cf. Müller 2017: 160), which, in turn, offers guidance for teachers in their individual text selection. Social imaginaries give insight into how people relate to and make sense of the environments and systems they live in and, vice versa, can shape collective meaning-making processes of events, experiences and values (cf. Taylor 2003: 24). With climate change, societies all over the globe are faced with a phenomenon that eludes the human perception because of its non-linearity, non-locality and non-materiality. The climate-related consequences that the world is facing today are rooted in past cultural practices, while current human actions will shape the future in a way that one can only anticipate. What arises from this non-linear nature of climate change is a sense of crisis of the present and the future.

Imaginaries of climate change are future-oriented in that they ‘encode not only visions of what is attainable through science and technology, but also of how life ought, or ought not, to be lived; in this respect they express a society’s shared understandings of good and evil’ (Jasanoff 2015: 4). These imaginaries are engraved with moral actions and orders that aim at anticipating and shaping a more desirable future and are thus likely to spawn stories that revolve around (un)ethical decisions, scientific and technological progress, resilience and multispecies collaboration. Indeed, many works of climate fiction, especially the ones falling into the spectrum of hard science fiction, thriller and action-adventure narrative, favour plotlines in which conflicts need to be solved and decisions need to be made for the greater good of humanity. Similarly, a great deal of ecologically-minded works, in particular those written for a younger readership, prefer hopeful stories in which young protagonists mature while saving and interacting with crisis-ridden environments and endangered species.

However, there are just as many cli-fi works that aim at inviting the very same future-oriented practices, but frame them differently: horror stories about a revenge-seeking fauna and flora, dystopian future scenarios of a planet without vegetation and comical or even satirical representations of socio-ecological conditions and eco-political decision-making are just as dedicated to engaging readers with the challenges of climate change and affecting climate-consciousness. This ‘framing’ (Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr 2023: 27) is part of the discourse specifics of a text and may function as a first criterion for teachers to decide whether or not the genre-specific and atmospheric affordances of a work of cli-fi are in line with the age and

interests of their respective learner groups. In the case of picture and story books, evaluating the framing of a work also involves looking at its multimodality and the ways in which the illustrations productively synchronise or break with the literary atmospheres reinforced by the creative interplay between the reader and the literary language (cf. Dederichs 2023: 42).

A second criterion may be the extent to which a work of climate fiction pluralises subjective experiences of time and space in the Anthropocene. This shows in the ‘scaling’ of local and global, short- and long-term perspectives on climate change as well as in ‘foregrounding’—or backgrounding—of certain aspects of these complex interrelationships (Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr 2023: 28–32). The way a work reinforces the interconnection of culture and nature and disrupts the categories of the human and the non-human may be a third marker for teachers. This can be determined with regard to the perspectives that a work offers on climate change from a narratological point of view and the extent to which this literary enforced perspective-taking fosters ‘critical empathy’ (38) and estranges the reader from their own anthropocentric beliefs and values.

Another social imaginary of climate change certainly is the phenomenon’s omnipresence and intersectionality. A last criterion that may help teachers to evaluate the aesthetic affordances of a work of cli-fi may therefore be the degree to which it underlines and even raises the complexity of climate change and fosters ‘systems thinking’ (Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr 2023: 38) by presenting how climate change influences individual, social, political and ecological spheres of belonging to a specific culture. Teachers should look out for if and how a story connects individual experiences of young protagonists (e.g., growing up, going to school, love and friendships, conflicts with parents) with larger social, intergenerational and ecological problems connected to climate change.

In what follows, these criteria are applied to Polly Ho-Yen’s novel *Boy in the Tower* (2014) to exemplify how far a work of fiction can be evaluated and selected in terms of the affective and aesthetic affordances it offers for literary learning arrangements in the sustainability-oriented EFL classroom. Based on this, task suggestions for the teaching of the novel in middle-grade EFL classrooms (grades eight to ten) will be discussed.

*Teaching climate fiction in the EFL classroom*

*Text selection: Boy in the Tower*

Set in a low-income neighbourhood in London, the dystopian story about a mysterious plant invasion in Polly Ho-Yen's *Boy in the Tower* (2014) unfolds through the eyes of the young and neglected teenage boy Ade, who must take care of his depressed and lethargic mother while a dangerous species of plants called the 'Bluchers' wreaks havoc by consuming buildings and emitting deadly spores. Originally targeted at readers aged 9 to 11 for whom English is their first language, this novel explores the breakdown of society and infra-structures of modern civilisation as the vegetal environment reclaims a highly urbanised space, thus bringing the daily life of a metropolitan area to a standstill and forcing residents to leave. Only Ade's tower block is spared by the Bluchers' insatiable hunger for metal and concrete, leading him, his immobile mother and a group of elderly neighbours to stay and wait for help in this desperate situation. The novel explores themes of environmental hazards, pollution, strange weather patterns and the troubled relationship between humans and nature in the Anthropocene, while also highlighting the importance of friendship, bravery, loyalty and resilience in the face of unfolding disasters, both in public and private spheres.

The content of *Boy in the Tower* touches upon many topic fields mentioned in UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals (2017) (SDGs), including SDG 3: 'Good Health and Well-being', SDG 11: 'Sustainable Cities and Communities', SDG 13: 'Climate Action', and SDG 15: 'Life on Land' (6). Furthermore, the work's discourse specifics and the ways its language and form foster systems thinking and critical empathy (cf. Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr 2023: 26–41) make it an appropriate, topical and relevant addition to the reading list for the sustainability-oriented EFL classroom.

Starting off with an intertextual reference to John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), one of the most influential post-apocalyptic plant invasion narratives of the twentieth-century, Ho-Yen's *Boy in the Tower* sets the tone for a story that, at a first glance, would fall easily into the genre of what has been dubbed 'plant horror' (cf. Keetley and Tenga 2016). The novel depicts a dystopian present-day London, where a young and underprivileged boy faces triffid-like plants that threaten his survival. As he grows up caring for his mother, who struggles with mental health

issues, the story blends family drama with science fiction, climate fiction, plant horror and action-adventure narrative.

However, the novel breaks with these frame expectations early on. The threatening vegetal environment presented in the story is not rendered a measurable space, as it would be in works of hard climate or science fiction. There are no scientists trying to decipher the Bluchers' genetic code, thus explaining away their origin and possible intention, and the government seems to be indifferent about finding solutions as to how to eliminate this new invasive species of plants to save people. Theories about where the Bluchers suddenly came from are only hinted at, with the strange weather and climate being the prime suspects. After all, the story is set in the 'wettest month on record' (Ho-Yen 2014: 12) and the Bluchers start growing the day after the monsoon-like rain stops, leaving London with a day that is described as 'one of the hottest that we'd had in ages' (24). Even though climate change is backgrounded as a phenomenon throughout the story, one cannot help but connect the many references to unusual weather patterns with the current climate crisis. When Ade is lamenting that 'this isn't normal times any more' (151), the novel foregrounds a state of emergency that has become *the* shared experience for people all around the globe in times of climate crisis.

The pervasive sense of uncertainty about the future that characterises life in the Anthropocene is reinforced through the vague descriptions of the threats encountered in *Boy in the Tower*. Instead of monstrous, blood-thirsty plants that are generic for many works of plant horror, readers are presented with dangers that cannot be sensed or even observed directly. As is the case with climate change, people are left with 'something in the air, something menacing out there that said, *No one is safe*' (Ho-Yen 2014: 86). Even the Bluchers, which theoretically could be empirically observed, remain a mystery. One of the few things that readers learn about them through the eyes of Ade is that they look 'beautiful' and 'weird' (232) and that they have a 'funny colour' (261). This leaves readers with the uncanny impression that the vegetal environment retains, to some extent, inexplicable qualities about it, demonstrating the limits of the human mind and language in the face of the complexity of environment-related phenomena. The catastrophic magnitude of the Blucher invasion for global well-being cannot be grasped by Ade, who observes in awe how nature, including the Bluchers, is reclaiming its place in his local urban neighbourhood. While the Blucher disaster terrifies Ade with a vision of

the future without humanity, the fact that the flora is taking revenge on humanity also comes across as reasonable and induces in him a sense of guilt for the anthropocentric urge to tame wilderness. Ade thus mirrors the complicated and ambivalent emotions that human beings feel when confronted with the scalar complexities of environmental change, so that the plant invasion appears not only horrific, but also weirdly beautiful to him:

It makes my head feel dizzy to see the whole world glowing like that [because of the Bluchers]. Because as afraid as I am of the Bluchers and as sad as I am about all the people who have died because of them, looking at them tonight, I still find them beautiful . . . . A small voice in my head wishes that we could both exist together, that the spores didn't catch in our throats and kill us and that we lived in wooden houses that they wouldn't feed on. (Ho-Yen 2014: 297–298)

In this passage, the temporal scales of the crisis-ridden present and a desirable future scenario are brought together by the focaliser. As a consequence, the 'what-if' of a Walden-like future in which human beings live in tune with their surroundings leads to a critical reflection of the status quo. What is also offered here is the scaling of spatial perspectives: on a local level, the Blucher invasion causes chaos and fear, with global consequences not yet to be foreseen. On the micro-scale of the domestic ecosystem presented in the novel, however, the Bluchers paradoxically lead to a more serene, maybe even sustainable environment. In this Blucher overgrown reality, nature thrives again and Ade notes rather fondly how 'as far as we can see there is just the green of plants and the funny colour of the Bluchers' and how the 'trees look like bubbly green clouds' with 'patches of thick grasses mak[ing] odd little shapes among them' (Ho-Yen 2014: 261).

Another positive side of the Bluchers is that they bring out the good in humanity by forcing strangers to move closer together and care for each other in the face of this catastrophe. Much of the story revolves around the topic of sharing food, resources and emotional warmth with strangers in desperate times, and so the scaling of local and global perspectives on the Blucher invasion in *Boy in the Tower* indeed manipulates reader expectations in the context of climate fiction. Instead of focusing on the battle between scientists and climate, man and nature, boy and Bluchers, the novel foregrounds the challenges and chances of swarm agency and resilience—both human and non-human—in the Anthropocene.

By deliberately not addressing climate change per se but rather dealing with how a changing climate is changing socio-ecological relationships, the novel lays bare the intersectional challenges of this issue and thus productively increases its complexity. In doing so, it acknowledges that climate change affects all areas of earthly life and leads to inequalities. In *Boy in the Tower*, people are not equally affected by the Blucher invasion. It is the poor who suffer the most under the consequences of this catastrophe and who are left to their own devices in a London ghetto. And in this precarious environment, it is a neglected boy who becomes emblematic for a generation that is expected to cope with the future consequences of environmental destruction all by themselves, while being denied a voice in current sustainability debates.

Seen from this point of view, young readers can possibly relate to Ade. More than a figure of identification, however, his social background and behaviour offer just as many moments of confusion and estrangement as empathy for readers. This main protagonist is not a typical eco-hero or climate-rebel 'who knows they will save the day', but a 'scared and worried' child, who is just as fragile as anyone when confronted with the forces of nature (Ho-Yen 2014: 227). Adding to this, Ade is a social outcast unable to emotionally connect to other kids his age except for one girl in his class. Unsure about whether he is 'a very good friend to Gaia', since he neither speaks up for her nor is able to 'say nice, comforting things that would make her feel better' when other kids tease her about her love of houseplants, he prefers a life of solitude (53). As soon as the rapid Blucher growth leads to a sudden and unusual emptiness of the streets in his neighbourhood as well as a relocation of his best friend Gaia, he realises how much he 'liked the busyness of everything and how, without it, [he] felt more lonely' (101). His strategy of coping with his changed home environment is to invent 'imaginary [pet] friends' (102), a form of escapism that distracts him from his worries and fears related to the impending disaster and the many losses coming with it.

Within literary learning contexts, Ade's disassociation from his surroundings allows for discussion of how such an 'out of sight, out of mind mentality' is indeed a problem that fosters a disconnect between climate reality and environmental action. Ade thus becomes a multi-dimensional focaliser who offers relatable as well as estranging perspectives on living in the Anthropocene. This makes him an interesting figure through which contradictory emotions that readers might be feeling

in these perilous times can be explored and negotiated within the EFL classroom. Dissent and conflict are part of climate communication, which is why fostering ‘critical empathy’ (Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr 2023: 33–38) for different perspectives and experiences through the reading of literary fiction in the EFL classroom can be considered highly productive. It helps raise empowered citizens who are able to reflect and critically negotiate viewpoints before taking a stand on environment-related issues themselves.

*Boy in the Tower* connects individual experiences of a young protagonist living through crises in the private sphere (e.g., growing up, struggle for autonomy, being an outcast, coping with a depressed mother) with larger social, intergenerational and ecological forms of crises connected to climate change (e.g., losing friends because of an environment-related catastrophe, conflicts with adult decision-making, adapting to changed environments, facing a food crisis and invasive species, death and survival), thus fostering systems thinking. It offers glimpses into the scalar complexities of environment-related disasters as well as a perspectivation of the contradictory human behaviours and emotions displayed by a complex and not necessarily likable first-person narrator. The novel does not foreground climate change directly but allows readers to draw analogies between the omnipresent threat of a lethal plant invasion and those of global warming. This, in turn, offers a critical distance from which learners might gain a deeper insight into the complexities and ambiguities of climate change. Thereby, the novel meets the different criteria outlined in the previous chapter and provides a rich source with multi-faceted incentives for teaching climate change-related issues in the English language and literary classroom.

#### *Task design and ESD learning processes*

*Boy in the Tower* is available both as a novel (ca. 329 pages) and as a shortened illustrated novella (ca. 55 pages) adapted for EFL learners at the CEFR level A1+ (Ho-Yen et al. 2021). The shortened version focuses on only the most important events from the plot, leading to the problem that the aesthetic and affective affordances of the original work get lost almost completely. The novella strongly focuses on the friendship between Ade, Gaia and his neighbours and the ways in which they try to survive and find solutions for the Blucher disaster, thereby filtering out not only the issue of mental health and the troubled relationship between Ade and his

mother, but also working against the socio-ecological, scalar and emotional complexities and contradictions of life in crisis-ridden environments which are evoked in the original novel. The illustrated novella is particularly useful to foster reading skills and strategies as it enables a motivating first encounter with longer fictional texts in the foreign language for learners at grades six to eight. However, if one intends to make the most of the discourse specifics, systems thinking and critical empathy provided by *Boy in the Tower*, working with the original novel is highly recommended.

The following model teaching suggestions were therefore designed on the basis of the novel and meant to be taught at grades eight to ten (learners aged 14 to 16 in the German school system), depending on the performance level of the respective learning group. The suggestions take into consideration the three competence fields of *Recognising* (i.e., knowledge about the foreign language and how to use it), *Assessing* (i.e., critically evaluating what language does to people) and *Acting* (i.e., using one's own agency as a language learner to explore what one can do with language) (KMK 2016: 159). In what follows, these three competence areas also form the basis of the tripartite structure of the German 'PWP approach' to lesson planning, consisting of pre-reading (*Recognising*), while-reading (*Assessing*) and post-reading tasks (*Acting*) (cf. Thaler 2008: 52). Taken together, these tasks should be taught successively in a sequence of approximately six 45-minute lessons.

Two scenes of *Boy in the Tower* serve as a basis for the task and lesson design. The first being one at the very beginning of the novel, in which Ade describes his neighbourhood from the bird's-eye view of his high-rise flat in his tower block (Ho-Yen 2014: 15-16). The second scene has already been discussed in detail above (297–298). It is about Ade being awestruck by the horror and beauty of the Bluchers surrounding his tower block. This scene offers incentives to think about convivial ways of living together with nature in the city and may foster learners' ability to critically reflect on the status quo as well as on their own values. It may further stimulate them to create their own visions of alternative and more sustainable cities and buildings of the future. The central setting in the novel is a highly urbanised and claustrophobic tower block neighbourhood, with metal, concrete, shops, vehicles, airplanes and socially disadvantaged people crammed into piling-up flats dominating the narrative (cf. 15–16). Vegetation is nowhere to be seen, except for

cultivated houseplants and some trees in a park, until the Bluchers appear to reclaim this artificial, manmade environment. Creative tasks that make learners think of a more liveable version of Ade's neighbourhood offer manifold ways to envision more sustainable futures.

### *Task design 1*

Grasping the drab and lifeless atmosphere evoked by Ade's descriptions of his neighbourhood is pivotal for an understanding of, firstly, why Ade fears as much as he admires how the Bluchers change his home environment, and, secondly, that his tower block cannot be considered sustainable and liveable and needs to change to raise the well-being of his tenants. Before learners are asked to creatively reinvent Ade's tower block, a first lesson (see Table 1) should therefore focus on making learners cooperatively visualise and compare the two scenes to help them understand and discuss the hopeless as well as the hopeful atmosphere evoked by Ade's description of the Blucher invasion.

Table 1: Task design 1

<b>Duration:</b> 90 minutes	
<b>Topic:</b> A look outside the window: Visualising Ade's neighbourhood with the help of an AI image generator	
<b>Main learning goal:</b> Learners use an AI image generator to capture the atmosphere of two scenes from <i>Boy in the Tower</i> and are thereby able to compare and analyse the different effects of the generated images in terms of the beauty and horror of the plant invasion.	
<b>Phase</b>	<b>Implementation</b>
Pre-Tasks ( <i>Recognising</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teacher shows a picture of a London tower block neighbourhood</li> <li>- Learners express how the picture affects them</li> <li>- Adjectives to describe atmospheres and moods are collected in a mind map (smartboard or blackboard)</li> </ul>
While-Tasks ( <i>Assessing</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learners scan their assigned scene from the novel for information on i) what Ade describes (nouns) and ii) how he describes it (adjectives) and write their findings in a table (worksheet) prepared by the teacher</li> <li>- In groups of three: Learners compare their findings and take notes on iii) the atmospheric effect of these descriptions (adjectives)</li> <li>- Learners use their notes to formulate prompts with</li> </ul>

	which they visualise their assigned scene with an AI image generator and together decide on the best picture
Post-Tasks (Acting)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pictures of scene 1 (Ho-Yen 2014: 15–16) are presented first, before the presentation of pictures of scene 2 (297–298)</li> <li>- Effects of the pictures are compared and discussed with regard to the different atmospheres created in the two scenes</li> <li>- Learners comment on the question: <i>Why does Ade find the Bluchers both creepy and beautiful?</i></li> </ul>

*Task design 2*

Now that learners have dealt with Ade’s living situation and his ambivalent feelings towards his Blucher-overgrown reality, they can juxtapose the novel with their own living circumstances on a crisis-ridden planet. To that end, the question as to how to live well in the city of the future becomes of interest for the next model teaching suggestions (see Table 2).

Table 2: Task design 2

<b>Duration:</b> 4 x 45 minutes		
<b>Topic:</b> Greening Ade’s tower block		
<b>Main learning goal:</b> Learners imagine how humans and nature can live harmoniously together in the city by designing more sustainable versions of Ade’s tower block neighbourhood		
<b>Phase</b>		<b>Implementation</b>
45 min	Pre-Tasks (Recognising)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The term sustainability is explained and written on the blackboard and learners share what they associate with it</li> <li>- Teacher shows a short video clip of a ‘sustainable skyscraper’</li> <li>- Learners note down and discuss aspects of sustainable living and architecture that they know from their own lives</li> <li>- Teacher writes important vocabulary being mentioned during the discussion on the blackboard</li> </ul>

	While-Tasks (Assessing)	- <i>Jigsaw</i> method: learners find out cooperatively about the characteristics of sustainable skyscrapers using text snippets or info sheets provided by the teacher <sup>1</sup>
3 x 45 min	Post-Tasks (Acting)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Question to be answered by learners: <i>How can we make Ade's tower block neighbourhood more sustainable, so that the Bluchers don't feel the need to harm human beings and destroy their buildings?</i></li> <li>- Learners use their findings from the previous lesson to brainstorm ideas on what a more sustainable tower block neighbourhood could look like</li> <li>- Learners visualise how Ade's tower block neighbourhood could look in a more sustainable future by either i) creating posters or collages, ii) crafting tower blocks using <i>Lego</i> or other materials or iii) designing a tower block version with the game <i>Minecraft</i></li> <li>- Learners present their results in the foreign language in a classroom <i>gallery walk</i> or display their created objects at a public exhibition</li> </ul>

As learners have to come up with an alternative and more sustainable version of Ade's tower block neighbourhood, they tackle with the issue of convivial world-making in an action- and production-oriented setting. This learner-centred, creative and multisensory way of interpreting literary texts further caters to the diverse needs of individual learners in the inclusive EFL classroom (cf. Bruschi and Caspari 2007: 174).

As a follow-up activity in the *Acting* phase, learners could be asked to conduct research on how sustainable the city of London presently is. Another more interdisciplinary idea for a project week could be that learners find out about how 'green' their school building or home town is, with results being displayed, for instance, at a virtual or public exhibition, possibly in collaboration with the local city administration. In terms of literary and language learning, another task could be that learners write a letter from the perspective of Ade to the mayor of London, pledging him

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<sup>1</sup> For authentic texts, see for instance Noyes (2021: Web), Buildner (n.d.: Web), National Geographic (n.d.: Web), Tomorrow's World Today (2021: Web).

to make his neighbourhood more sustainable and maybe even Blucher-friendly.

*Towards a Climate Fiction Lab*

The English literary and language learning classroom in particular opens a communicative and imaginative space in which learners can engage critically and holistically with abstract global phenomena such as climate change through the estranging effects of fictional worlds. Teaching climate fiction is key to fostering the ability to envision alternative futures through a critical evaluation of the present. However, this analysis has shown how complex the evaluation of a work of cli-fi can be in terms of the actual potential it provides for cultivating climate change literacy in the EFL classroom. The already demanding job of a teacher leaves little time to select from the myriad of cli-fi works available those that best meet the individual needs of heterogeneous learning groups. The *Reading for Change (ReaCh)* project established by a group of researchers at the Department of English II at the University of Cologne in 2023 acknowledges the need for developing tools to support EFL teachers in their role as change agents in the context of sustainability-oriented literary and language teaching and learning.

Linked with the UNESCO *BRIDGES* programme, the *Wissenschaftsforum zu Köln und Essen*, and the *Teacher Education for a Future in Flux Academy*, *ReaCh* aims to foster collaboration among students, teachers, schools and researchers interested in developing and professionalising in innovative ways to teach languages and literatures within the framework of a future-oriented teacher education. One research initiative of this literacy project is the *Climate Fiction Lab (Cli-Fi Lab)*. The main objective of this innovative format is to support primary and secondary school teachers in making informed decisions about which works of climate fiction to read in their inclusive EFL classrooms. This is done by (1) conducting research on the selection and assessment of literary works in the context of climate action and quality education, (2) creating a climate fiction survey for teachers (grades three to ten), (3) developing ESD-related tasks and literary learning activities for selected books, and (4) making these materials and tools available online and in workshops.

The analysis and model teaching suggestions provided in this paper for Polly Ho-Yen's novel *Boy in the Tower* can be seen as an example of the kind of practice-oriented research currently conducted in the Cologne-

based *Climate Fiction Lab*. The formulation of cross-curricular demands for environmental teaching and learning is a necessary and commendable step in the direction of stressing the need for a transformative pedagogy. For the contribution of ELT to ESD-related learning processes, it would be wise to refocus the specific potentials that literary and language learning may provide. These lie in the discursive, affective and global relationalities and complexities that are made tangible for learners through estranging encounters with the foreign language in general and literary language in particular. Let us practice what we preach as EFL teachers and recognise, assess and act on the imaginative affordances of our subject and those of literary fiction.

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