

Introduction

Engelbert Thaler

Is transhumanism really one of “the four greatest threats to humanity”, along with fundamentalism, nationalism and democracy, as the Indian neuroscientist Abhijit Naskar once put it provocatively? Or does transhumanism lead mankind’s eternal quest to its final destination – the Fountain of Youth, the Elixir of Life, the Philosopher’s Stone: immortality?

With the help of technology, transhumanists intend to improve intellectual faculties (intelligence, memory, concentration), physical attributes (health, ageing, vitality), and psychological properties (resilience, self-efficacy, moral enhancement). No doubt they have already achieved remarkable progress in many diverse fields. For example, the Nobel Prize 2020 for chemistry was awarded to Emmanuelle Charpentier and Jennifer Doudna for the development of the CRISPR/Cas9 genetic scissors, a method of genome editing, which may make the dream of curing inherited diseases eventually come true. In addition, innovations in Artificial Intelligence, bionic implantation, cognitive enhancement, neural (mind-machine) interfaces, genetic engineering, space colonization etc. promise paradise on earth. Yet what about the political, economic, social, cultural, and ethical repercussions of these *Brave New World* building blocks?

Transhumanism represents both a fascinating and frightening topic – “mysterium tremendum et fascinans”, as theologian Rudolf Otto summarized the ambivalence of God’s sanctity. It is of timeless topicality and existential relevance. And by now, there is a plethora of fascinating literary and non-fictional texts, pop songs and music videos, movies and TV series, docus and games, which are likely to have great appeal with our students, and which provide some sweet agony of choice for teachers.

For all these reasons, this book is dedicated to the language teaching potential of transhumanism. As all edited volumes in the SELT (Studies in English Language Teaching) series, it follows a **triple aim**:

1. Linking TEFL with related academic disciplines
2. Balancing TEFL research and classroom practice
3. Combining theory, methodology and exemplary lessons

This triple aim is reflected in the **three-part structure** of this volume. In Part A (Theory), the topic of *transhumanism* is investigated from the perspectives of three academic disciplines, i.e. TEFL, literary studies, and media science. Part B (Methodology) assembles five contributions on rewarding methods, media and materials with regard to teaching transhumanism. Four concrete lesson plans can be found in Part C (Classroom). These lessons were designed by students and lecturer at university and finally revised by the editor. Each of these four chapters is divided into background information, procedure (source, synopsis, competences, topics, level, time, phases of the lesson), materials (texts, worksheets, board sketches), solutions (expected answers), and bibliography.

Part A is introduced by the **TEFL perspective**. **Engelbert Thaler** tries to elucidate what we understand by the term *transhumanism*, what topics and problems we face, what media are suitable for classroom use, what lesson scenarios seem effective, what benefits we may reap, and what challenges we have to cope with.

The perspective of **literature** is adopted by **Roman Bartosch**. He critically assesses the potential of posthumanism for educational discussions of literary learning, especially in the context of digitization as well as literature and media pedagogy. Focusing on the pedagogic potentials of novels and internet memes, he argues that these media underline the importance of empathetic perspective-taking, reconceptualized as *relatability* in the English classroom as well as the virtual world of the web.

Klaus Bredl embraces the perspective of **media science**. He first explains the concepts of trans- and posthumanism. Then his contribution focuses on the role of technology in transhumanism. At the end, two specific topics are briefly discussed: the relationship between transhumanism and spirituality, and the current situation of Covid-19 with regard to transhumanism.

Part B is introduced by **Werner Delanoy**. He first discusses different trans- and posthumanist perspectives, before he draws our attention to their relevance to (English) language education. Finally he presents some ideas for **teaching Neal Shusterman's *Arc of a Scythe* trilogy**, with a special focus on the first novel (*Scythe* 2016), as these young adult novels display a future scenario for humankind where transhumanist ideas and ideals have become a reality.

Peter Hohwiller proves that dystopian fiction has more to offer than *Brave New World* and 1984. **John Lanchester's 2019 novel *The Wall*** has many

ticks in the right didactic boxes, as it is short, linguistically accessible for Sekundarstufe II courses, and it deals with a topic of global concern: climate change. In his contribution, Hohwiller discusses the didactic potential and the classroom application of Lanchester's novel.

Yuval Harari introduces *Homo Deus*, this famous outlook into tomorrow, with the bold claim that humanity has finally triumphed over the "Three" Horsemen of the Apocalypse, i.e. starvation, epidemics, and violence, and is now on the hunt for new nemeses. Employing the *scenario technique*, **Arthur Haberlach** provides students with Harari's insights into our path to becoming transhuman "homines dei". His article also presents songs, fictional and non-fictional texts as well as videos and current pop-cultural influences, in order to equip students with the necessary tools on their journey through the 21st century – or even beyond it.

These books have sold more than 20 million copies worldwide, and the TV adaptation has become one of the most popular cable series worldwide: *GoT – Game of Thrones*. Along with encouraging film literacy, **Nicolina Pullmann** focuses on promoting intercultural awareness of the formation of gender roles beyond the binary in a radically altered world. Showing that gender has always been linked to power and privilege by analyzing *The Purple Wedding* scene of *GoT*, she intends to inspire students' curiosity to move beyond the old dualities when thinking about the age of transhumanism.

Stefanie Fuchs is concerned with the question of what relationships emerge between concepts of **identity** and technology. After a brief critical examination of the topic of transhumanism, several teaching ideas for secondary TEFL classrooms are recommended, including the thematic frames of *I am a Superhero*ine*, *Inspector Gadget*, *Batman*, *Superman*, and *Iron Man*.

Part C comprises four contributions, which demonstrate how transhumanism can be made concrete use of in the English language classroom:

- To begin at the beginning: What is *transhumanism*? **Ben Maré Dutschmann** tries to answer this question by resorting to a YouTube clip. In episode 20, *Transhumanism: Will Humans Evolve to Something Smarter?* by *BBC Ideas*, the philosopher Julian Baggini explains what transhumanism is and what the radical idea of a humanity 2.0 could mean for our future.
- Do you want to live in a world where humans are genetically engineered to stop aging at 25? Against the background of global overpopulation, people from this age on have to gain time to extend their life span, which makes time instead of money the currency of this dystopian society.

Katharina Stark teaches the American science fiction action movie *In Time*, combining TBLL (Task-Based Language Learning) and Blended FBLL (Film-Based Language Learning). In addition, she briefly describes numerous movies that deal with the six major motifs of transhumanism: super-longevity, genetic engineering, neurological manipulation, mind uploading, cyborgs, and Artificial Intelligence.

- The relationship between transhumanism and religion is explored by **Lorenz Körner**. Based on texts from the Holy Bible and other sources, his teaching unit informs about goals, chances, effects and limits of transhumanism against the background of religious concepts like salvation and eternal life. The sequence is intended for CLIL courses (Religious Education & English) and applies the *jigsaw technique*.
- To finish with, it is **Ben Maré Dutschmann's** turn again. He makes students aware of the ambivalence of human enhancement, which can be both a blessing and a curse. The topics of designer babies, neural interfaces and CRISPR-Cas9 are discussed via group work, and rounded off with the *good angel/bad angel technique*.

These lesson scenarios as well as the theoretical and methodological contributions in this volume may help you to decide whether 16th century English philosopher Francis Bacon (“Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed”) or modern-day transhumanist Chris Armstrong (“Nature, to be transcended, must be amended”) is right.

Referring to the famous opening sentence of Rousseau’s magnum opus *The Social Contract* and Karl Marx’ *Communist Manifesto*, transhumanist Simon Young solemnly professes: “Man is not born free, but everywhere in biological chains. People of the world, unite – you have nothing to lose but your biological chains.” Assuming that humanism freed us from the chains of superstition, he wants transhumanism to free us from our biological chains. Apart from the intricacies of collective appeals, unchaining nature and throwing off shackles, however, do not automatically lead to universal bliss.

In his science fiction novel, *The Broken God* (1992: 236), American author David Zindell presents this dialogue:

“What is a human being, then?”

“A seed.”

“A ... seed?”

“An acorn that is unafraid to destroy itself in growing into a tree.”

Let’s hope that in this process, not too much of the essence is destroyed. And what would Miranda in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (V, i) finally reply?

“How beauteous mankind is!
O brave new world,
That has such people in’t!”