

## How a Rainbow Flag Can Change Everything: LGBTQI+ Voices from *Small Town Pride* (2022) in the EFL Classroom

Marco Schoeber ([m.schoeber@uni-leipzig.de](mailto:m.schoeber@uni-leipzig.de))

TEFL instructor, Leipzig University, Germany



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**Abstract:** *The aim of this research article is to present a micro case study of the use of Phil Stamper's novel Small Town Pride (2022) for discussing sensitive issues such as sexual diversity with upper-intermediate and advanced learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The findings are based on a reflection of the current state of research as well as of the relevant concepts and theories from the fields of pedagogy, psychology and English-language didactics. The article makes concrete suggestions regarding how to approach the process of planning and implementing a teaching unit that aims to make LGBTQI+ voices visible in EFL lessons and shows ways of engaging with the novel in a manner that promotes diversity and transcultural learning.*

**Keywords:** Didactics, EFL, LGBTQI, Sexual Diversity, Small Town Pride, , TEFL, Transcultural Learning

### 1. Introduction

Social media platforms like TikTok are increasingly influencing the consumer purchase decisions we make. But the hashtag #booktok shows that TikTok can also be interesting for publishers, authors, literary critics and above all, bibliophiles. Book reviews and short video clips about recent publications provide information about the latest trends in the world of literature and provide children, teenagers, and young adults with particularly easy access to reading (Duncan 2022). For instance, Phil Stamper's novel *Small Town Pride* (2022) was to be found among the #booktok recommendations for the first half of 2022. This literary text will be employed to show how sexual diversity can be made the subject of EFL lessons for teenage learners from the age of 14 onwards. To this end, the book will be placed in the context of various didactic as well as pedagogical theories. Furthermore, the article will make concrete suggestions for working with a piece of LGBTQI+ literature in an EFL classroom that strives towards promoting diversity and transcultural learning.

### 2. The Current State of Research: LGBTQI+ Voices in the EFL Classroom

Even though addressing global issues on a larger scale is standard practice for the majority of EFL teachers today, not all issues are equally prevalent in the classrooms of our schools. Therefore, it can be worthwhile to consider the development of different concepts from the field of global education in this section. What is more, research on ways of dealing with controversial issues is considered as the theoretical basis for this article. Publications highlighting the importance of LGBTQI+ voices in particular, both in the student population and in dealing with literary texts at school will be foregrounded in order to deduce their implications for the development of teaching with regard to the subject of English as a Foreign Language.

Published more than two decades ago, a compilation edited by Block and Cameron (2002) highlights the role globalization has played in the spread of English as a lingua franca. Apart from pointing out the necessity of discussing global issues in the EFL classroom, the contributors to the volume strive to foster an understanding of how modern technologies (e.g. the internet) can be employed to discuss the pressing issues of our time (Lütge et al. 2022). Goredema (2020) concludes that societal views and values regarding topics like globalization, immigration or gender ideology have become increasingly diverse after conducting research on attitudes towards such hotly debated issues within in the population of pre-

and in-service teachers from the German state of Saxony. However, little research has been carried out in terms of how teachers at secondary schools feel about addressing certain curricular themes that might be deemed contentious or controversial. For topics pertaining to same-sex marriage, sexual harassment as well as trans identities, Goredema's study reveals some marked differences in the levels of comfort teachers feel when teaching a lesson about these issues. Pre-service teachers exhibited a more positive outlook on them in general, compared to in-service teachers. In line with these findings, Savitz et al. (2023) state that topics that are considered taboo should be taught in the English-language classroom (e.g. as one element of literature instruction) to increase understanding of the issues at stake and to empower teachers and students alike to engage in meaningful conversations about complex, uncomfortable issues.

The history of addressing sexual identities in literature for children and young adults has evolved over time to become increasingly authentic, honest and mindful. Venzo and Moruzi (2021) maintain that the shift to a more open-minded and respectful discourse about sex and sexuality can be seen across many literary and media genres, ranging from picture books, graphic and YA novels to film and television. In this new development, authors are helping to provide young readers with the information and resources they need to navigate topics of sex and sexuality, as well as helping to further normalize and destigmatize these topics. Moreover, there has been a growing trend towards incorporating queer and trans perspectives into the school curricula. This evolution becomes visible in the increasing prevalence of LGBTQI+-themed texts in the English language classroom. Incorporating controversial societal issues into English-language instruction can be an effective way for intermediate and advanced EFL students to develop an understanding of diverse (trans-) cultural perspectives on a wide range of topics. It can also help them to form their own opinions on these issues and foster an overarching sense of respect and tolerance for being different or for 'otherness' in general. Drawing on various theories from the realms of culture, literature and gender didactics, Merse (2017) sets out to examine the implications of concepts of difference and otherness in relation to EFL classroom practices. Moreover, he focuses on gender and sexual diversity as one particular dimension of the aforementioned categories. By referring to one example of LGBTQI+ young adult fiction, Merse presents ideas on how literature can be put to queer-informed use in the EFL classroom. Hence, he showcases the significance of literature in creating a safe and inclusive learning environment that acknowledges and celebrates the diverse identities of students. In the context of literature instruction, even more specific aspects such as the selection criteria for appropriate YA queer literature have been considered (Logan et al. 2014). Furthermore, Paiz (2020) provides EFL teachers with practical advice for creating queer-inclusive educational spaces by focusing on how to apply advances in LGBTQI+-related research in TEFL and applied linguistics to the classroom. Additionally, he points out how the potential of integrating queer themes into the English-language classroom allows for the emergence of a variety of (student) voices that may once have needed to remain silent (Burke and Greenfield 2016), and addresses ways of handling resistance and critical questions concerning the process of opening up the once heteronormative classroom to embrace diversity. As a matter of fact, the development of teaching does not come to a halt at this point as works of literature do not merely represent the complexity of LGBTQI+ identities but embrace the intersection of different identities (e.g. queer and people of color). According to Paiz and Coda (2021), the intersectional nature of identities will have profound implications on learning and teaching practices in the contemporary English-language classroom when it comes to exploring these issues with students. To broaden the scope of dealing with such complex issues, the contributors to a volume edited by Gerlach (2020b) examine how foreign language teaching can be enriched by incorporating critical approaches such as Critical Literacy or Critical Pedagogy to exploit the full potential of content that can be addressed in the foreign language classroom. In another compilation, Eisenmann and Ludwig (2019) tackle this issue by examining how literature can be employed in a student-centered way as a tool to promote discussions around gender through engaging with a cornucopia of texts and other media.

### 3. Methodology

Based on a reflection of the current state of research as well as of the relevant concepts and theories from the fields of pedagogy, psychology, and English-language didactics, the use of the novel *Small Town Pride* by Phil Stamper for teaching upper-intermediate and advanced learners will be justified and illustrated by means of selected ideas, taking into account current approaches to the teaching of culture and literature. The novel is thereby understood as a resource that is examined from different perspectives within the framework of a micro case study. Even though this research design might not be frequently employed in TEFL research, a micro case study can be defined as the analysis of cases „that occur [...] in a confined setting and are simple and straightforward in nature” (Alpi and Evans 2019, p. 2). Consequently, such a study is very brief and relates to a clear problem of interest, namely whether the novel *Small Town Pride* can be fruitfully exploited for discussing sexual diversity in the EFL classroom.

Based on the findings from the reflection on relevant theories and concepts, suggestions will be made on how to approach the process of planning and implementing a teaching unit that aims to make LGBTQI+ voices visible in EFL lessons and to deal with them in ways that promote creativity as well as diversity. Therefore, the following research questions will be examined:

- From a pedagogical and didactic perspective, to what extent is Phil Stamper’s novel *Small Town Pride* suitable for making LGBTQI+ voices visible in the middle- and high-school EFL classroom (grades 8-12)?
- What are the practical implications of using the novel to teach English in terms of classroom content and activities?

#### 4. Phil Stamper’s Novel *Small Town Pride* (2022) at the Intersection between Diversity and Puberty

By 2011, more than 200 novels with queer protagonists at the center of the plot had been published since 1969 according to Wickens (2011, p. 49). It is safe to assume that a much larger number of such publications are now in circulation, as this novel is one of the most recent examples. More precisely, it can be deemed an example of diversity fiction. Diversity fiction lives up to the claim that “books are meant to become more truly representative of the fabric of life in this diverse world” (Thaler 2019, p. 21). By placing a queer youth at the center of the novel, the author contributes to the normalization of sexual diversity, which is not yet taken for granted in many regions of the world, or in rural areas for that matter. In its original context of publication in the United States, its target audience consists of middle-grade readers (Years 8-10). Since dealing with an entire book in the EFL classroom requires a certain level of skills, lexical and grammatical competence on the part of foreign language learners, the book might prove to be fairly challenging for adolescent readers at upper secondary level (Years 11/12) as well.

In the novel, 13-year-old Jacob ‘Jake’ Moore lives in the fictitious small town of Barton Springs, Ohio. After coming out to his parents, they hoist a large rainbow flag in the backyard of the family’s house, which subsequently draws mixed reactions from some of the townspeople and even the protagonist himself. In addition to his parents, who act as straight allies, Jake is also supported by his best friend and neighbor Jenna Thomas, who repeatedly takes a clear stand against any form of homophobia and supports Jake in the matters close to his heart. She is also on his side when Jake decides to organize the first Pride parade in Barton Springs. However, this project must overcome some obstacles, and the teenagers need to muster up the courage to face open resistance. First and foremost, Angela Miller, the town’s mayor and prime antagonist in the story, stands in the way of this endeavor as her value system is rather conservative, and she fears for her re-election. Another challenge is posed by Jake’s infatuation with the mayor’s son, Brett, who is initially shy, but later seems to reciprocate his feelings. After the town council, chaired by Mayor Miller, refuses to approve the Pride parade in Barton Springs, the group of Jake, Jenna and Brett manages to mobilize family members and school friends to find a solution to allow for the festival to take place after all. Jake also receives unexpected support from Pastor Nicole, the leader of the

local faith community, who also views the church as having a moral duty to create a safe haven for everyone in the community. In the end, the organizers succeed in convincing the town council to grant the desired permission, so that the first Pride parade eventually can take place in the small town, attracting more than 1,000 visitors.

The coming-of-age story told in the novel picks up on important developmental steps on the path to adulthood. Jake not only succeeds in finding his place in the community, but also learns to use his voice to achieve his goals. In order to make the protagonist's unfolding development more tangible to (teenage) readers, his journey is represented by the analogy of an online video game he plays and the changing connotations of the rainbow flag in the Moores' front yard. To begin with, the computer game Songbird Hollow simulates life in a village. In the simulation, players must not only successfully run a farm, but they can also flesh out their personal lives. For Jake, this means that he can marry a same-sex partner and is greeted by cheering virtual villagers on that occasion – a supportive community that he can only dream of in real life at the beginning. However, the more he succeeds in realizing his dreams in reality, the less he feels the need to retreat to the online world of the game. A similar development becomes evident in the importance Jake ascribes to the rainbow flag in his family's front yard. At first, he feels embarrassed by this open statement and, in his heart of hearts, wants the flag to disappear from the front yard again. Over the course of the novel, however, he becomes aware of what the rainbow flag stands for and recognizes an expression of the value he ascribes to himself as a human being in it. Beyond that, the rainbow flag is also a symbol of tolerance towards and acceptance of the diverse conceptions of living together. Where it can be flown as a beacon of liberty and without consequences, people can express their pride in having achieved societal equality. Conversely, where displaying the flag is punishable by law, it stands as a symbol against intolerance and illustrates the unbroken pursuit of human and civil rights.

Apart from a thorough content analysis of the novel, a student-oriented, sensitive discussion of sexual diversity with teenagers in the middle grades (Years 8-10) also requires giving thought to the developmental stage of puberty in which the learners who are to deal with those topics find themselves. Puberty is a phase of fundamental neurological and hormonal changes and remodeling processes, whose consideration is pivotal for a successful teaching process (Sambanis 2013, p. 88). In addition to dealing with physical and neurological changes, students are also expected to cope with so-called developmental tasks – tasks which are defined based on social roles (Havighurst 1956, p. 216). Havighurst describes a social role as a behavioral pattern which is expected and predefined by people of a certain social group. When such a social role is expected of people from a certain age, one speaks of a developmental task. The completion of these developmental tasks is not only socially expected by most people but is usually also individually aspired to and desired. Finding one's own identity, for example, is considered one of the central challenges of adolescence (Sambanis 2013, p. 88). This identity formation includes the developmental tasks of learning mostly binary, masculine and feminine social roles, the establishment of a unified value system of one's own, accepting one's own body and gaining independence from one's parents. Consequently, cultural and societal gender-related norms have a deeply formative influence on adolescents during this developmental stage and tie in with the physical and psychosexual changes experienced by teenagers (Hopf 2008, p. 33). Physicality and sexuality are becoming increasingly important components in the external perception of young people. This fact is further underpinned by estimates assuming that 3 to 10% of the global population identify as bi- or homosexual (Carpenter 2016). Therefore, we as teachers can be assured of also having students in our classrooms who have to come to terms with their sexual awakening, and consequently are affected in a rather personal way by the themes dealt with in Phil Stamper's novel. Therefore, we need to embrace a liberal amount of empathy regarding the extent to which we delve into such and similar notions with our learners. It goes without saying that care must be taken to allow for the greatest possible openness in the teaching and learning process in order to open up equal opportunities for participation for students regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, etc.

## 5. From PARSNIP to Transcultural Learning: Working with LGBTQI+-Themed Literature in the EFL Classroom

Phil Stamper's novel *Small Town Parade* offers a transcultural glimpse at experiences that connect us in life because his text deals with topics such as friendship, first love, coming out, puberty/growing up, and implicitly calls for acceptance of societal as well as sexual diversity.

As research in the field of foreign-language didactics shows, in the past twenty years there has been an increase in approaches to incorporating the topic of sexual diversity in the teaching of English. In this context, the influence of teachers and textbook authors should not be overlooked. Already in the year 2002, Gray states that the aforementioned agents wield a considerable influence on the topics covered in global EFL course books, e.g. by deliberately omitting and/or avoiding aspects of content such as politics, alcohol, religion, sex(uality), narcotics, -isms, and pornography (hence he chose the acronym PARSNIP) (Gray 2002, p. 159). Two decades later, Gerlach likewise notes a tendency in teachers and teaching materials to neglect such content (Gerlach 2020a, p. 23). He criticizes this state of affairs and argues for greater emphasis and awareness in foreign-language classes, as these topics have great significance for young people. Although there have been increased efforts to establish such PARSNIPs among the themes dealt with in the foreign-language classroom in recent years, these have often remained the (somewhat random) initiative of individuals and have so far passed into mainstream teaching sporadically, although topics such as pornography, sex and sexuality seem to be almost omnipresent in contemporary media worlds constantly navigated by our youngsters. For example, whereas the term "diversity" can now be found in many curricula throughout the federal states of Germany, the interpretations of what it entails vary. In Lower Saxony, however, the English curriculum for grammar schools has explicitly called for the consideration of sexual diversity in EFL lessons since 2015 (Niedersächsisches Kultusministerium 2015, p. 6). However, this is by no means the case everywhere. Curricula and school guidelines are considered potentially monosexually, namely heterosexually constructed text types (Merse 2017, p. 185). Due to the omnipresence of issues pertaining to sex (uality), this seemingly still widespread narrowing of the range of topics in terms of content should be redressed. The aim of all teaching should be to enable education in the sense of respect and tolerance and to create visibility of social issues that affect us all in one way or another. By employing the novel *Small Town Pride*, a contribution can therefore be made to representing this diversity in our society in the EFL classroom and to amplify the voices that have not truly been heard so far.

At the level of foreign-language didactics, the contribution of literature to inter- and transcultural learning should not be underestimated in any way (Kramersch and Kramersch 2000, pp. 553, 569). Along these lines, Surkamp maintains that films, but also literary texts, assume a world-shaping character through the fictional design and reinterpretation of culture-specific experiences and, as a medium of human appropriation of reality, contribute significantly to cultural orientation and the creation of meaning (2004, p. 249). By offering a specific response to social matters, they expand the realm of what can be thought and experienced and shake up entrenched modes of perception (Surbkamp 2004, p. 249). In the case of Phil Stamper's novel, the following pivotal aspects can be considered.

- *Small Town Pride* offers opportunities to reflect on and discuss universal themes like growing up, friendship, (first) love, civil courage and diversity.
- It draws attention to the characteristic features of American high school life, thus inviting comparisons to one's own experiences with school and education as well as highlighting cultural diversity and complexity.
- It provides readers with the opportunity to explore the protagonists' lives (e.g. Jake, Brett, Jenna), their attitudes, values, conflicts, and identities.

- It engages foreign-language learners in meaningful interaction about the role of diversity in society.
- It mirrors different cultural and global discourses (e.g. we vs. the other(s), rural vs. urban, homogeneity vs. diversity) and provides opportunities for learners to participate in these discourses.

In this context, Freitag-Hild (2010, pp. 111-121) suggests a number of different task formats which are suitable for facilitating inter- and transcultural learning through literature.

- Warm-up tasks (warming up to topic/book), e.g. speculations based on the book cover about its contents and themes.
- Self-perception tasks (reflecting on oneself), e.g. discussion of responses to characters (Jake, Brett, Jenna).
- Interpretation and empathy tasks (comprehending content and changing perspective), e.g. role biography or interview (Jake, Brett, Jenna).
- Analysis and reflection tasks (analyzing and reflecting on reader response) e.g. representation of rural life and associated different norms and values regarding sexual diversity.
- Negotiation tasks (negotiating of meaning), e.g. discussing a conflict (Brett's dilemma whether to support his mother or his crush Jake).
- Contextualization tasks (relating to context), e.g. researching cultural contexts (e.g. human rights movement/LGBTQI+ rights movement, life at an American high school, rural vs. urban life).
- Reflection tasks (reflecting on learning/reading process), e.g. discussions, reading log.

## 6. Ideas for Working with Phil Stamper's Novel *Small Town Pride* in the EFL Classroom

When planning out a series of lessons or a unit on Phil Stamper's novel *Small Town Pride*, it is of utmost importance to become aware of the fact that students can be affected by the issues addressed in the novel themselves. The following ideas can help to deal with this situation in a considerate and sensitive way.

- Developing prejudice awareness by specifically addressing how differences between people can help to foster a sense of mutual acceptance and appreciation.
- By shifting the negotiation of sensitive topics such as an individual's sexuality to characters from literature, students who are affected by the topic but have not yet had a coming out due to external and internal circumstances can also get involved. In many cases, middle and high school students find it difficult to identify, verbalize, and ultimately discuss their own feelings. Shifting to literary characters can remedy this challenge and create spaces for expressing one's own state of mind.
- By creating opportunities for participation (e.g. developing a social media campaign as part of project work) and stimulating discussions about social and global issues, a broad discourse and social exchange is supported and encouraged from a young age.
- Appealing to our learners for and employing sensitive language ourselves can help everyone understand that their own thoughts and feelings are being acknowledged, which can help boost their self-worth tremendously.

In the following, various ideas for working on the novel during the individual phases of the reading process are presented. Whether these ideas are intended for an entire series of lessons or individually

matching elements are assembled into one or more lessons is up to the teachers and their own creativity. In addition to the accentuation of the content, this individualized approach extends to the setting of specific lesson aims and the selection of suitable methods and media as well.

(i) *PRE stage* (functions: reactivating prior knowledge, reactivating/introducing vocabulary, hypothesizing about content/characters):

- *Teenage troubles*: What challenges do we face as teenagers in the 21st century? Do we feel adequately prepared (by our family, school, ...) for the challenges of the future? (Possible activities: brainstorming followed by plenary discussion, exchange in buzz groups, fishbowl discussion)
- *Love and sexuality*: Have I experienced feelings like being in love? What is more important to me: friendship, family, or love? What role does sexual diversity play in our society or in our everyday life? (Possible activities: [confidential] interview with oneself, silent discussion, position lines)
- *Protest*: What forms of protest do I know and how effective do I find them? How can I make my voice heard as a teenager? What are the limits of protest and what would I be willing to sacrifice for my beliefs? (Possible activities: brainstorming, ping-pong discussion, angel vs devil debate).

(ii) *WHILE stage* (functions: structuring and supporting text comprehension):

- *Contextualization*: human rights movement and LGBTQ+ rights – Working on the motif of the rainbow flag: What does it stand for? How does the meaning of the rainbow flag evolve for the protagonist? What connection can be made between the flag and the feeling of being (able to be) proud of oneself? (Possible activities: short presentations, tracking specific developments within the novel)
- *Working on the characterization of the protagonists and their relationships to each other*: considering similarities and differences of love and friendship as relationship patterns and illustrating the findings made with suitable passages from the text (Possible activities: true/false statements, single/multiple choice questions, juxtaposition of suitable passages from the text).
- *Making your own voice heard*: What obstacles do the protagonists face in the novel concerning the realization of their dream of a Pride festival? (Possible activities: Finding appropriate passages in the text, creating a timeline of the major stages leading up to the Pride festival in Barton Springs).

(iii) *POST stage* (functions: reflecting on the experience of dealing with the text, engaging in creative or analytical follow-up work on the text and its themes):

- *Reflection tasks*: How effective are the means chosen by the protagonists to achieve their goals? What alternative measures could they have taken to organize the Pride festival? (Possible activities: brainstorming)
- *Subjective responses*: writing a formal e-mail to the mayor on behalf of the group; texting one of the protagonists with ideas to make their protest successful or to show support; angel vs. devil debate from the perspective of the mayor's son (supporting his mother vs. supporting his crush); writing a blog entry/newspaper article about the first Barton Springs Pride festival (Possible activities: depending on the task format, but in any case, ample scaffolding for written and oral production needs to be provided)

- *Creative tasks*: designing a flag for something the students are proud of; planning a festival under a certain motto/to celebrate diversity (Possible activities: different configurations of pair and group work).

Since many similarities between working with literary texts and films can be attested (Thaler 2014, p. 41), the post stage of dealing with the book can be enriched by working with a film facilitating transcultural learning on topics such as friendship, first love, and growing up. Recently, several award-winning queer-positive films have been released. They lend themselves to work in the EFL classroom both as a whole film, but also just based on selected scenes. On the one hand, there are romantic drama films such as *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) or *Summer of 85* (2020), which themselves are already based on novels and enjoyed great popularity upon their release. The most recent example is the Oscar-nominated Belgian coming-of-age film *Close* (2022), which tells the story of an intimate friendship between two teenage boys that breaks up very painfully. It is precisely this focus on external factors in a society forcing the boys to adapt to prefabricated, heteronormative gender images that makes it particularly suitable for delving into the topics mentioned above with the learners.

## 7. Conclusion

The variety of connections and themes that arise from dealing with the novel *Small Town Pride* in the EFL classroom shows that it is suitable as reading material for intermediate and advanced learners. It is up to the teacher to decide whether to work with the book in its entirety or only in excerpts. Dealing with an excerpt can be just as effective as working with the novel as a whole. As a brief look at the curricular integration of the topic area has shown, it is certainly the task of schools to explicitly address social structures, to promote cognitive engagement with the concept of diversity, to stimulate processes of reflection and awareness-raising, and to open up new perspectives on the world (König 2014). While Goredema's research has shown that some teachers still might feel uncomfortable when it comes to navigating contentious curricular topics (2020, p. 266), there is no denying that the EFL classroom is a suitable place for dealing with the diversity of English-speaking cultural areas and for fostering an appropriate, sensitive use of language (Merse 2017, pp. 112-113). Yet Goredema rightly points out that by "following the directives in the liberal-progressive curriculum [of Saxony, a German state] [...] and] attempting to teach learners to become critical thinkers, one may inadvertently instill one's own perspectives. This may be deemed a positive should the views be conducive to a functioning society; however, there is no accounting for personal opinions" (2020, p. 266).

At the level of intercultural learning, another interesting by-product of working on the novel *Small Town Pride* is the glance its narrator casts at life and daily routines at an American high school. For example, he describes the role of school buses, various school subjects, the use of lockers, and the students' involvement in clubs such as the school band and the cheerleading squad among others. Through his descriptions, he offers the readers a glimpse of the importance of supporting one's school (school colors, school mascot) and its teams (the Bulldogs), i.e. the much-praised school spirit/patriotism in the United States. These observations provide our learners with some starting points for comparing the (school) world experienced through literature to their own lived-in world and allows for them to not only change their perspective, but also to relativize individual perspectives on their own and foreign cultures.

Many other publications like *Small Town Pride* can be found on the current book market – some of them are even promoted under #booktok on TikTok in a similar fashion. As a matter of fact, all of them often contain a positive message about tolerance, inclusion, diversity, and respect for differences, which are important values for students to learn from an early age. As more schools begin to include LGBTQI+ literature in their curricula, more young people will learn the importance of advocating human rights and respect for all people. This development could lead to broader acceptance of LGBTQI+ individuals in our society and encourage more inclusive environments in schools and – later on – workplaces. LGBTQI+



voices in literature can be a powerful tool in teaching related topics, especially to students who may not yet have experience with these identities. As most literary themes tend to be universal and relatable to students of any background or nationality, they often have important messages that transcend language and cultural differences. Using LGBTQI+ literature in the classroom allows students to learn about different gender identities and sexual orientations in a safe and inclusive environment. It can also help to increase cultural awareness and acceptance and reduce stigma and discrimination towards LGBTQI+ people. Beyond that, LGBTQI+ students are likely to feel more comfortable discussing their sexual orientation or gender identity if they feel supported by the people around them. This can be especially important for LGBTQI+ students who may not have supportive families, or in areas where it can be difficult to find a supportive community. These students may find it helpful to deal with books that feature characters they can identify with at some level.

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#### AUTHOR'S BIO-NOTE

**Marco Schoeber** is currently a TEFL instructor at Leipzig University, Germany. He has served as a teacher of English and History at an academic high school and a teacher trainer in various contexts. His current research interests include TEFL curricula in academic teacher education as well as the role of literature in the EFL classroom.