

Engelbert Thaler (ed.)

# Teaching Transhumanism

**SELT** / STUDIES IN ENGLISH  
LANGUAGE TEACHING

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## Teaching Transhumanism

# SELT STUDIES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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## 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, docs 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, Hohwiler 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 Deutschmann'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 16<sup>th</sup> 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!”



## **A. Theory**



# Transhumanism in Language Teaching

Engelbert Thaler

Onco-mice and cloned sheep, drones and auto-automobiles, neuro-enhancement and prosthetic therapy: Is transhumanism a “movement that epitomizes the most daring, courageous, imaginative, and idealistic aspirations of humanity”, as the American libertarian science writer Ronald Bailey hailed it (2004), or rather “the world’s most dangerous idea”, as the well-known US political scientist Francis Fukuyama (2009) once called it. This paper attempts 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.

## 1. Terminology

Given the multitude of different directions, it is not surprising that we face almost as many definitions as there are people writing about the subject. There is no generally valid definition of *transhumanism* (Latin “trans”: ‘beyond’, and “humanus”: ‘humane’). Max More (1990) offers the following definition:

Transhumanism shares many elements of humanism, including a respect for reason and science, a commitment to progress, and a valuing of human (or *transhuman*) existence in this life rather than in some supernatural ‘afterlife’. *Transhumanism* differs from humanism in recognizing and anticipating the radical alterations in the nature and possibilities of our lives resulting from various sciences and technologies such as neuroscience and neuropharmacology, life extension, nanotechnology, artificial ultraintelligence, and space habitation, combined with a rational philosophy and value system.

In nuce: Transhumanism represents a line of thought that seeks to expand the limits of human possibilities by using various technological procedures. The evolution of life has promoted the development of higher and higher species – and probably did not end with man.



“Human is a step in evolution,  
not the culmination.”  
(Nikola Danaylov)

In the past, nature has brought forth new species, but today man has so much scientific and technical skill that we can consciously create new species.

Through conscious self-evolution, humans may perhaps transform themselves into higher beings who are physically, intellectually, ethically, culturally, aesthetically and emotionally much higher than they are today – as far above us humans as we are above the monkey:

*from*  
*Trans-Chimpanzees*  
*to*  
*Trans-Humans*

The conceptual heterogeneity, on the one hand, results from the multitude of disciplines involved (biology and philosophy, cybernetics and artificial intelligence, political science and literary studies, nanotechnology and complexity theory, etc.), and, on the other hand, from the overlap with the concept of *posthumanism*. “We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism” (Hassan 1977: 843). Posthumanists (cf. i.a. Nayar 2014) deny the classical humanist paradigm, “in which an ideal human Self/Subject stands at the center of creation and commands all that is not made in ... ‘His’ image” (Csicsery-Ronay 1999: 313), reject a human exceptionality (Snaza et al. 2014) and demand the decentering of the human being.

This implies a fundamental egalitarianism, which starts from a single matter, postulates an equality of all life and abolishes traditional binary oppositions (Braidotti 2014). That is why opposites such as nature – artificiality, body – spirit, material – virtual, organic – mechanical, human – animal are obsolete.

To further increase the terminological confusion, the affixes post- and trans- as well as super-, meta-, hyper- or anti- appear as prefixes of humanism. Although *posthumanism* is the most popular term, this “post” (‘after’) evokes either the departure from humanity and the paradoxical notion that man has the will and the power to proclaim his end, or associations with ‘against / anti’. *Transhumanism* seems to be a more appropriate term, because it is more neutral in value, not reminiscent of ‘after’ or ‘anti’, something that lies beyond common notions of the human being and does not have to be limited to technological innovations.

## 2. Issues

In view of these facets, the following thematic decalogue could be dealt with in foreign language teaching.

### 2.1 Practical Issues

What is the likelihood that the goals sought by transhumanists can actually be achieved?

Critics doubt the feasibility of predicted technologies and point to numerous failed prophecies concerning technological progress in the past (Jones 1998, Dublin 1992). However, one could also argue that in view of the enormous medical progress in recent decades, humanity is already transhuman.

### 2.2 Ethical Issues

To what extent do transhumanist positions threaten human values?

The Nobel Prize 2020 for chemistry was awarded for the development of *Crispr/Cas 9*, a method of genome editing. With the help of these genetic scissors, the dream of being able to cure inherited diseases may come true. This tool has taken the life sciences into a new era and can bring great benefit to humankind. Yet, what is a promise, can also be a peril. Due to its potential to alter human heredity, *Crispr* has become one of the most controversial developments in science. In 2018, He Jiankui, a Chinese scientist, announced that he had used the tool to edit the genes of human embryos, which brought forth the world's first genetically modified infants. His experiments were condemned by many in the scientific community as reckless and risky.

Several biologists reject the intention of interfering with nature by overcoming universal human limitations (ageing, physical and cognitive limits), eliminating the difference between humans and artifacts, and producing human-animal chimeras (McKibben 2003, Rifkin 1993, Newman 2003). However, some personality theorists discard this criticism as anthropomorphobia (Isaac Asimov's "Frankenstein complex", i.e. the fear of mechanical men, which produces the "yuck factor", a reaction of repugnance and distaste), or regard physical self-optimization as a logical consequence of a commercialized hyper-individualism.

This begs the question: Is there still an ontological distinction between human – non-human – inhuman – animal?