

MODEL FOR PROMOTING ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE IN GERMAN STUDIES

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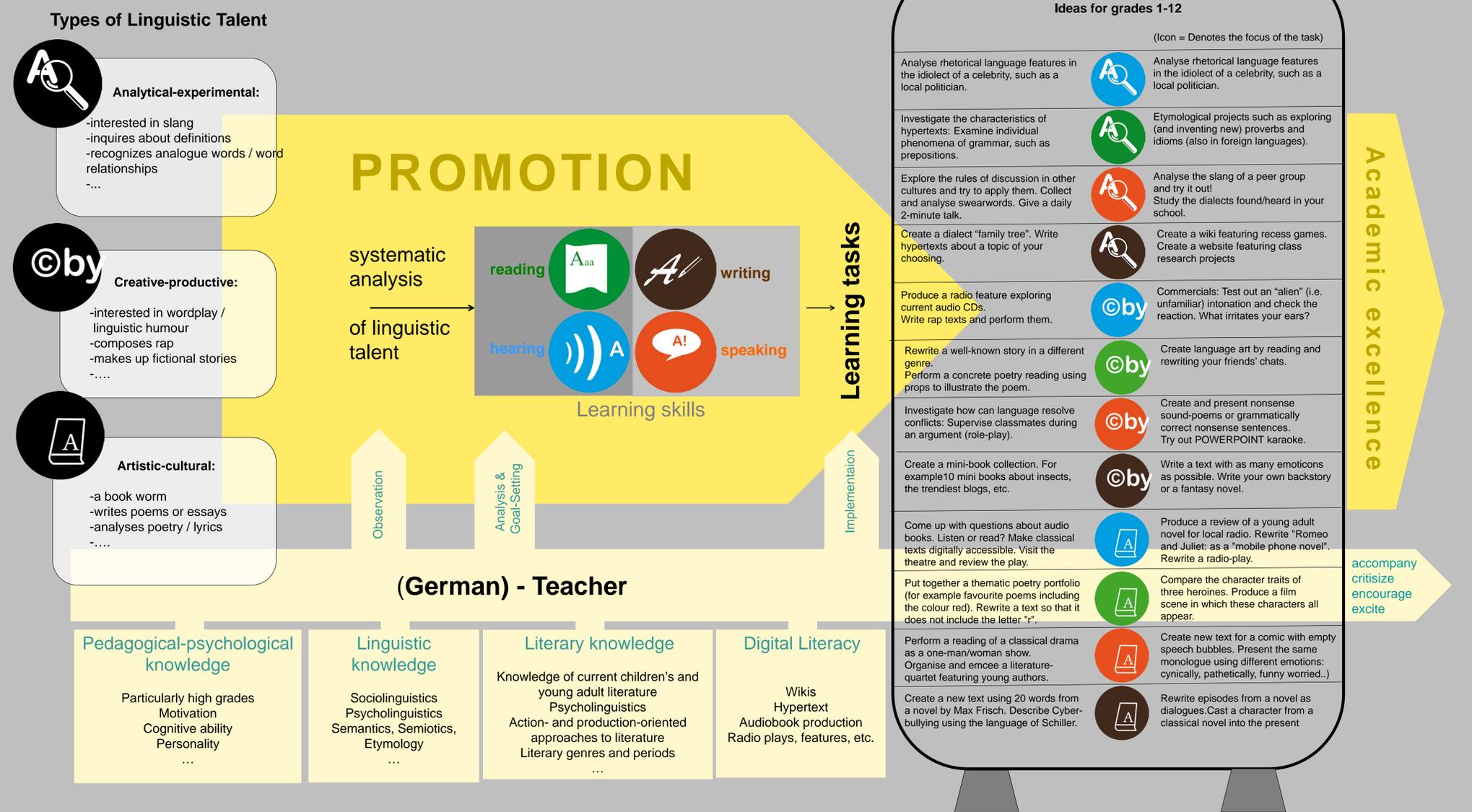
BACKGROUND / DEVELOPMENT

Gifted language learners continually seek new challenges for which teachers must produce suitable learning tasks. How do we define gifted (German) language learners? How are their talents diagnosed and by whom? Language talent can manifest itself in very different areas: From an interest in slam poetry to the writings of Goethe, or from an affinity for (teenage) slang to an interest in etymology (see Farkas 2013). If a learner's interest in a given language area is coupled with a strong affinity for language, the learner is assumed to be "gifted" (Farkas 2011) which is expected to result in linguistic academic excellence in early adulthood (Ziegler 2008). How can these gifted students best be fostered during their primary and secondary education? The answer is complex as each language domain calls for a different type of

pedagogical support and encouragement. Each case calls for individualized scaffolding to best suit the current ability of each language learner. Thus, teachers must be well versed in linguistics and pedagogical-psychology in order to best promote individual talents and to encourage or provide constructive criticism as required.

Systematized language and subject specific knowledge aid teachers in generating competence-oriented German-learning tasks (Gailberger & Wietzke 2013; Philipp 2014). The aim is that these tasks are age-appropriate, as well as challenging and inspiring with the possibility of encouraging and supporting future linguistic academic excellence.

MODEL FOR PROMOTING LINGUISTICALLY GIFTED LEARNERS – THE LANGUAGE DRAWER



EXPLANATION OF THE MODEL

The model is read from left to right. It describes a process, which begins with learners who exhibit a language-learning behaviour suggesting high linguistic potential. Examples of such behaviours might include being particularly interested in the use of idioms or linguistic humour, or being a voracious reader. Linguistic talents can vary, thus teachers should be sensitive to diverse learner interests and aptitudes.

The aforementioned linguistic talents are often just beginning to develop and as such may not always be obvious. This model shows that a teacher first observes and then analyses linguistic talent. This process is supported by the four pillars of German teaching - pedagogical-psychology, linguistic, literary and digital knowledge - shown in the middle of the diagram. The teacher then selects a learning goal and a suitable task for the student. The task should be well suited to the learner's current level of ability, while also considering the domain of the linguistic talent.

A teacher must therefore have a solid background in the four pillars mentioned above in order to complete the three steps of observation, analysis and goal/task setting. This can be seen at the bottom of the model, which shows the foundation of professionalism in teaching.

The right half of the model depicts various examples of possible tasks. They are marked with different colours and symbols. These icons show which task best suits which learning style (colour) and to which linguistic subsection (symbol) it belongs.

The model as a whole depicts the process of promoting high linguistic potential towards academic excellence. The process includes practice, failure, support, endurance and hopefully also many small victories on the way to holistic linguistic excellence.

Specific Tasks and Next Steps

The result of the above reflections is a series of specific tasks for highly gifted language learners. It is a collection of short as well as extensive projects to promote linguistic excellence in various domains of language learning. The collection must indeed grow as it is used, for every student has individual needs which must be accounted for. The ideas collected here are soon to appear in a brochure entitled "Sprachkommode" (The Language Drawer).

A further project will tackle the question of what kind of teacher training is necessary to facilitate work with the tasks collected here. Based on teacher feedback, we know that the analysis as well as the adaptation of tasks is challenging, as they require teachers to have particular linguistic knowledge. Further teacher education must therefore rest on the following three pillars: Deeper knowledge of media literacy and German didactics, as well as knowledge of how to effectively promote gifted learners.

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