

Chapter 11

Creating Stories: Generative Artificial Intelligence Tools as Writing Tutors

Franziska Lys

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8979-5601>

Northwestern University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on examining the strengths and limitations of prompt-driven ChatGPT for a creative writing task using German as a foreign language. College students of German at the advanced level were asked to develop, write, and illustrate a unique children's story using ChatGPT as a thinking partner. Interacting with ChatGPT in German, students engaged in informal and low-stakes writing-to-learn activities that could help them think through ideas and key concepts for their stories, as well as learn new vocabulary, expressions, and language patterns. Answering to learner-produced prompts, ChatGPT provided both explicit and implicit learning situations that focused on vocabulary development and grammar in a meaning-focused context, creating conditions in which learners could learn according to their current language proficiency. The author discusses how they set up the project, what tasks and prompts they used to elicit content, and how they prepared illustrations using an artificial intelligence image generator.

Writing is an important and necessary skill to communicate with others effectively. It can be challenging, however, to be able to express oneself accurately and convincingly, especially for learners of a second or foreign language. Achieving a high level of proficiency, that is, effectiveness of meaning, structure, tone, and mood of one's writing, presupposes a good understanding of grammatical features as well as a large vocabulary. The question of how to best help a group of college students learning German at a university in the Midwest in the U.S. improve their writing and grammar skills surfaced during the preparation of one of the author's latest teaching assignments, a class on advanced German grammar. The author had taught this course before, using a grammar book for speakers at the C1 level. Although students seemed to be satisfied with the course material and grammar assignments and thought they had

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learned a reasonable amount, in-class writing tasks, homework assignments, and quiz results suggested otherwise. Overall, students were able to solve grammar exercises such as fill-in-the-blanks and short rewrites when presented with rules and examples but failed to use or understand the same structures in more contextualized and meaning-driven contexts. For example, students were able to fill in past tense forms in prepared sentences, but unable to explain the usage and meaning of the following verb forms found in a children's book *Die Kleine Hexe: Ausflug mit Abraxas* (Preussler et al., 2017):

- *Das hätte ihm höchstens die kleine Hexe erklären können. Aber die hatte sich längst mit Abraxas davongeschlichen* (Only the little witch could have explained that to him. But she had long since sneaked away with Abraxas).
- *Als sie auch noch ihren Besen Purzelbäume schlagen ließ, unterbrach sie Abraxas* (As she was also making her broom do somersaults, Abraxas interrupted her).

A further conundrum concerned the grammar points to present and practice. As experience had shown, many of the explanations and exercises that the grammar book offered were beyond students' active language use. The students could translate expressions such as *angesichts des schlechten Wetters* (given the bad weather), *kraft ihres Amtes* (by virtue of their office), *ungeachtet der Warnungen* (regardless of the warnings), as well as reflexive verbs such as *sich ins Zeug legen* (to do your best) and they could also use these expressions in full sentences, but they could not use them clearly and correctly in different contexts. Similarly, most students struggled to see the relevance to their learning of sentences such as the ones below, either because of the complexity of the grammar (subjunctive and passive) or the strange context:

- *Wenn die Deiche nicht ausgebaut worden wären, hätte es zu grösseren Überschwemmungen kommen können* (If the dikes had not been expanded, major flooding could have occurred).
- *Je mehr Schokolade eine Frau isst, je besser ist sie vor Schlaganfällen geschützt* (The more chocolate a woman eats, the better protected she is against strokes).

Chavez (2016, 2017) investigated what grammar points college learners of German (1st through 4th year) found to be the most difficult to learn as well as the least relevant for self-expression. Third-year college learners of German listed adjective endings and noun gender as the most difficult, and fourth-year college learners mentioned cases, noun gender, and adjective endings. The forms third-year learners listed as the least relevant for self-expression for them were passive and subjunctive. Some of the reasons the students gave for the abovementioned difficulties were the complexity and opacity of rules, the number of rules, and the infrequent occurrence of certain forms in the material they encountered. There was a disconnect between what the grammar book provided (i.e., the forms that the book's author felt needed to be practiced as well as how to practice them) and what the learners perceived as difficult and worthy of reviewing and practicing.

In order to provide a more engaging and effective learning environment, the author added a task-based writing project that involved the creative use of ChatGPT (<https://chat.openai.com>) to the class syllabus: The instructor asked the students to develop, write, and illustrate a unique children's story using ChatGPT as a thinking partner. Interacting with ChatGPT in German via its Web-based interface, the students developed their story by weaving together ChatGPT's suggestions to text prompts eliciting cultural and linguistic information. The instructor chose a task-based approach because of its focus on

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