

# CREATIVITY AND COGNITION IN FICTION BY TEENAGE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

## Abstract

Learning a foreign language provides an entry point into the lives of cultural ‘others’, as does the reading of realistic fiction. Responding to the challenges of both tasks requires concerted cognitive effort, but also creativity. First, individuals need to override the automatic tendency to prioritize their own point of view and then, at least temporarily, imagine themselves into another’s position. When reading fiction, focalisation determines whose views the readers can access, but point of view is implicit in all language. L2 learners need to recognize and imitate the world view implicit in the target language. In this article, we present both skills – empathy and mimicry – as acts of creative cognition that develop from responding to literature.

This article examines works of fiction written by 15-16-year-old Swedish learners of English in response to a short story by Salman Rushdie. The story contains culturally specific information, and the ending encourages readers to recognise their own assumptions alongside the focalising character. The study draws on cognitive narratology to examine the Swedish learners’ fiction in terms of empathy and mimicry. The aims of the analyses are to determine how the short story and task design promote creative cognition, and to identify where the learners reveal a lack of understanding or an over-reliance on stereotypes.

## Introduction

Learning a foreign language provides an entry point into the lives of cultural ‘others’, as does the reading of realistic fiction. Responding to the challenges of both tasks requires concerted cognitive effort, but also creativity. Empathizing with a cultural standpoint or even just the opinions of another individual requires setting aside one’s world experiences and opinions, at least temporarily, and the creative capacity to imagine oneself into a different situation. Equally, learning another language requires a letting go of one way of viewing the world in order to recognize the world view implicit in the target language. Proficient speakers (of both L1 and L2) imitate their conversational partners in order to signal solidarity (or deliberately differentiate their language to signal distance). This kind of mimicry is known as ‘linguistic alignment’ and can take place on varied levels: register, word choice, syntax and pronunciation. Linguistic alignment indicates sophisticated social skills as well as the capacity to identify and recycle the relevant linguistic features. By mimicking the language of proficient speakers of the target language, L2 learners acquire sophisticated insights into the language and its cultures.

Learning to mimic a style of speech or writing is a highly demanding, creative cognitive task that requires close analysis of another's voice. Thomas Ward and Yulia Kolomyts clarify that

[c]reative cognition is concerned with explicating how fundamental cognitive processes, available to virtually all humans, operate on stored knowledge to yield ideas that are novel and appropriate to a task at hand.

(Ward and Kolomyts, 2010: 93)

The key feature of cognitive approaches to creativity is the aspect of 'stored knowledge'. Ward and Kolomyts explicate how existing knowledge determines the quality and relevance of creative acts. They also explore the possibility that knowledge of more than one culture and multilingualism might encourage more creative thinking, and conclude that the empirical findings so far indicate that culture has a stronger impact than language, but that both contribute to the capacity to think divergently (Ward and Kolomyts 2010: 107-8).

This article examines creative writing by 53 Swedish learners of English aged 15-16 years in terms of both the cognitive processing involved and the creativity needed to complete the task successfully. The pupils wrote endings to 'Good advice is rarer than rubies' (hereafter 'Rubies'), a short story by Salman Rushdie (1994). Rushdie's story incorporates culturally specific information and the twist in ending that encourages readers to recognise their own prejudices alongside the focalising character. The pupils initially read a foreshortened version of the story, ending just before the twist is revealed. The analyses of their texts draw on cognitive narratology and educational theories espousing creativity to examine two aspects of creative cognition – empathy and mimicry – starting with examples of which indicate an absence of such skills.

Story-writing is generally conceived as a creative activity. Creativity, as Alan Maley and Tamas Kiss point out, has become a 'buzzword', and as a result the meaning of 'creativity' has become blurred (1). Maley and Kiss devote much of *Creativity and English Language Teaching* to trying to define precisely what it means in the context of teaching a language. They draw on the work of James Kaufman and Robert Sternberg (2010, xiii) to identify the three conditions that must be met for something to be valued as creative: 1) novelty, 2) quality and 3) relevance. Note that all three criteria are contextually bound, intertwined and somewhat arbitrary. As Todd Lubart points out, "What is novel in one society may not be novel in another" (2010: 267). He continues noting that most utterances are 'novel' in the sense that the precise combination of words has not occurred before, but typically lack the second criterion: 'quality'. The third criterion – 'relevance' – determines whether the novelty is of a high quality in the specific situation. Learning another language frequently requires novices to creatively use their limited vocabulary and knowledge of language form to communicate. Their attempts are only valued when they also satisfy the conventional parameters of the situation. As such, creativity and conventionality go hand-in-hand. We value the capacity to understand and replicate the conventions of language alongside the ability to creatively adapt such knowledge in a novel way.

The task of writing a story-ending is what Rob Pope has termed a 'textual intervention' in his book of the same name. Pope argues that "The best way to understand how a text works

... is to change it: to play around with it, to intervene in it in some way (large or small), and then try to account for the exact effect of what you have done” (1995: 1). Having illustrated this point using a car advertisement, Pope then draws attention to the way in which *all* texts (and images) have undergone a series of interventions before they even become available to another person. Teacher selection then adds a further layer of intervention determining which texts are made available to their pupils. Keith Oatley (2003: 161-174) has coined the useful neologism ‘*writingandreading*’ to capture the intimate connection between two aspects of literacy that are often treated as though they were separate, although they overlap. His primary concern is with the role of reading in the production of text, but his arguments also support Pope’s claims for writing tasks to fully engage in reading (see also Scott 2018). In the process of *writingandreading* ‘Rubies’, the pupils needed to engage with conventions of narrative, the speech patterns of the characters and the style of narration, the cultural context of the story as well as trying to determine what the characters are thinking and feeling based on limited information. The aims of this study are to determine how this textual intervention promoted creative cognition, and to identify where the learners reveal a lack of understanding or an over-reliance on stereotypes. Without wishing to promote a purely functional view of the uses of literature in L2 education, the paper promotes the teaching of literature by demonstrating the broad range of cognitive skills evident in the pupils’ writing.

### **Reading ‘Rubies’; Writing Wrongs**

The material used in this discussion is drawn from a larger set of ethnographic data collected from six classes in two Swedish high schools over the course of an academic year. In the larger study, 121 pupils read five short stories written in English and produced their own works of creative writing in response. This paper is based on a subset of 53 story-endings based on ‘Good advice is rarer than rubies’ (hereafter ‘Rubies’) by Salman Rushdie (1994). The data was collected with permission from the pupils (who, at 15-16 years, were old enough to give consent themselves) and their teachers as part of their ordinary classwork after the university’s internal ethics board determined that a full ethics review was not necessary. The data has been anonymised. As the size of the data set suggests, an in-depth analyses of all the fiction produced by the teenagers is not possible, nor is our goal to produce a full quantitative analysis. Instead, we use the data to drive our claims concerning the creative cognitive processes involved in *writingandreading* L2 literature. Text examples are cited verbatim, complete with spelling and grammatical errors. Interview data is presented in translation or summary.

Rushdie’s story depicts a meeting between Miss Rehana and Muhammad Ali outside a British embassy. Miss Rehana is a beautiful young woman from Lahore (Pakistan) who is applying for a permit to go to England to marry the man chosen for her by her parents when she was a child, shortly before they died. Her arrival at the embassy is observed by Muhammad Ali who functions as the story’s focalizer. He makes his living by offering “good advice” about the interrogation ahead, and dealing in forged documents. Ali is dazzled by both Miss Rehana’s appearance and her quiet self-confidence. She listens to Ali, but refuses

to accept the forged documents and enters the embassy. Ali is unsettled by the encounter and waits for her. After many hours, she exits and greets him.

She seemed calm, and at peace with him again, and he thought, My God, ya Allah, she has pulled it off. The British sahibs also have been drowning in her eyes and she has got her passage to England. He smiled at her hopefully. She smiled back with no trouble at all. (Rushdie, 1994: 13)

As the excerpt shows, readers are directed to adopt Muhammad Ali's interpretation of Miss Rehana's smile, and the twist in the tale is that Miss Rehana is happy because she her permit was refused. She wanted to honour her parents' wishes, but also wants to live the life she has created for herself. By refusing her a visa, the embassy staff have made this possible.

The pupils were given copies of the story that ended with the above citation and asked to write the ending. Since the text positions readers to align their interpretation of Miss Rehana's smile with Muhammad Ali's interpretation, most pupils assumed that Miss Rehana received her permit but offered a variety of outcomes. The main trends are summarised in the Table below.

Table One: Content Analysis of the Endings

Goes to England (inc 1 'return' to England)	Happily	26	Mixed feelings	2
Stays in Pakistan	Happily	9	Unhappily	2
Miss Rehana is a victim of violence/murder/rape	in Pakistan	9	in England	2
Miss Rehana becomes	Assertive / aggressive	6	Violent	2
Muhammad Ali	Reforms	12	is prosecuted	3
Miss Rehana and Muhammad Ali begin	a romance	4	a friendship	6
Muhammad watches her leave	12			
The characters exchange greetings	8			
Not stated what will happen	2			

As one can see, violence featured in many of the endings, which may partially be explained by the pupils' knowledge of the boxer, Cassius Clay, known as Muhammad Ali, as well as their conceptions of arranged marriage. Equally, their knowledge of the singer, Rihanna, resulted in portrayals of Miss Rehana as an assertive, independent woman. These associations were revealed in the field notes and interviews held with three pupils per class after the task was complete. They indicate the favouring of external knowledge and beliefs over information drawn directly from the story: the pupils have engaged less with Rushdie's characters, and more with their previous beliefs.

One way to interpret the way the pupils' recycling of the characters' names would be schema theory. Peter Stockwell defines a schema as "the conceptual structure drawn from memory to assist in understanding utterances" (2019: 77). Schema theory foregrounds the most efficient way the brain stores and processes information. This efficiency can cause problems: people are more likely to notice and accept information that fits with existing schema. Evidence that challenges an existing schema requires considerably more cognitive effort to process. Recycling the fighter / singer-activist schemata is less challenging than paying attention to the nuances of Rushdie's characters.

Schema theory focuses on individual concepts, and is often productively combined with script theory, which describes “a sequence of events or actions [that] is expected to unfold” (Stephens, 2011: 14). The classic example of a script in Roger Schank and Robert Abelson’s seminal paper is the sequence of behaviours in a restaurant that result in food being ordered, delivered, eaten and paid for (1975: 151-152). Arguing for applications of script theory to children’s literature, John Stephens claims that “the process of connecting apparently deviant or merely unexpected events may involve readers in unfamiliar insights and perceptions, or may even transform the script into another way of understanding the world” (2011: 14). This is highly relevant for foreign language education where one of the goals is to engage with scripted behaviours that are typical of the target culture, but not typical in the home culture. A simple example might be whether or not one removes one’s shoes when entering a home. Rushdie’s story relies on readers’ knowledge of the visa application script. Normally, people only apply for a visa if they actually wish to travel to the destination. Miss Rehana disturbs this script by applying although she does not wish to travel.

Visiting foreign embassies and applying for visas are not typical behaviours for teenage Swedes, so the story-endings show a broad array of misunderstandings as to how these processes work. There are many other scripts in Rushdie’s story that would be more familiar: catching a bus, eating and sharing street food, tricking the gullible and arranged marriages. Here it becomes relevant to consider which culture is being presented in the story and whether there is a ‘correct’ way to understand them. Bombay born Rushdie was educated in private schools in Britain, and has since worked from both the UK and America. None of the teachers or pupils involved in this study have visited Pakistan. In short, all of us are outsiders piecing together differing amounts of knowledge and experience. In an interview in relation to the science fiction story the pupils read after ‘Rubies’, one pupil commented that he preferred Sci-Fi because it put teachers and pupils on an equal footing. When reading stories like ‘Rubies’, he assumed his teachers knew ‘everything’ about the culture, but no one was an expert on Sci-Fi cultures. This comment suggests that teachers might model how they ‘know’ about cultures they have not visited more overtly in the classroom.

One script the pupils were expected to draw on was the genre convention of the short-story. ‘Rubies’ was the third of five short-stories pupils read within the project. They had also read stories before taking this course, in both English and Swedish. In *Making Sense of Narrative Text*, Michael Toolan (2016) outlines the many facets of the short story that readers need to combine ranging from combining sentences, recognizing lexical patterns, understanding situation and mental picturing. Despite the complexity of the task, *all* of the pupils seemed to have gained sufficient familiarity with the genre to mimic what Mary Louise Pratt identified as the dominant “short story structural types ... moment-of-truth, the exemplum, or the joke”, even though they received no explicit teaching about these conventions (1981: 175). Jokes were entirely absent in the story-endings based on ‘Rubies’, but most contained a moment-of-truth. The most common of these being that Ali feels sadness as he watches Miss Rehana leave or that the two form either a romantic attachment or a friendship. There were also numerous rightings of wrongs: Muhammad Ali saw the error of his ways in twelve endings and was prosecuted in a further three.

Toolan identifies two factors that play prominent roles in readers' experiences of short stories: empathy and prediction (2016: 1), skills that are cognitively complex and require creativity. Whilst his focus is on how the language of the text affords these skills, he also acknowledges that empathy also draws on cultural scripts, ideological values and indirect references to both things within the text and to things which (are assumed to) exist in the readers' worlds (Toolan, 2016: 2). The teenage *writerandreaders* we cite cannot be expected to have the breadth of world knowledge, cultural knowledge or even the basic language skills to attend to all the affordances of Rushdie's story, however they can be expected to understand and reuse deictic elements. These are the aspects of language that signal position and relationships between objects (e.g. through pronoun shifts from 'you' to 'I' and 'we' to 'them').

Toolan's work is supported by 'Deictic Shift Theory' (DST) which shows how the deictic elements of language are crucial for building empathy (Scott 2018: 85-87; 2014: 105-107). At the most basic level, this involves understanding that a speaker's 'deictic centre' when they refer to themselves as 'I' and the place where they are as 'here' are different from the listener's deictic centre (Levinson 1983: 64-68). This basic recognition of the existence of more than one point of view is the foundation what is known as 'Theory of Mind' (ToM) (e.g. Stockwell 2019), that is the ability to infer what someone is thinking and feeling from observation. Whilst DST focuses on the specific linguistic features readers need to identify, educators tend to emphasise how such actions can improve empathy and cross-cultural communication.

We regard the pupils' recognition of conventional features of the short story and their ability to incorporate them into their own writing as part of the 'relevance' criterion within creativity. That is, the task generated a framework of relevance in terms of both the content (the characters and the situation in Rushdie's story) and the form. In the following section, we review notions of creativity in relation to the task of learning another language and its associated cultures in order to clarify how we are applying the notions of 'quality' and 'originality' to our evaluations of the pupils' story-endings.

### **Creative Conventionality: Theory of Mind and Mimicry as Cognitive Skills**

The smooth running of many aspects of our daily lives relies on formulaic language. Consider, for instance, the exchange of greetings that take place at the beginning of a phone call. This is usually followed by series of moves that lead to the caller clarifying the purpose of the call and conclude with similarly conventionalised leave-taking. Liz Stokoe (2018: 1-19) describes such moves as a "conversational race track" in which conversational partners collaborate to achieve the same goals. Her work aims to enable non-linguists to recognise the practical value of knowing how conversation works in minute detail, so they may avoid misunderstandings and communication breakdowns. The underlying argument is that people are not as individual as they might like to think: the vast majority of speech follows highly predictable patterns. The figures vary somewhat in different studies, usually between 50% (Erman, 2007) and 60% (Erman & Warren, 2000), but Wray and Perkins (2000) estimate that as much as 70% of adult native speakers' language may consist of formulaic, prefabricated expressions. Novelty is not inherently valuable: conventionality is also prized.

Successful L2 acquisition involves understanding the culturally specific racetracks associated with the TL. Many of the invented dialogues in L2 textbooks are comprised of formulaic exchanges, e.g., booking a hotel room. Invented dialogues are criticised for failing to provide learners with appropriate pragmatic models for authentic turn-taking (see, e.g., Gilmore, 2007). One argument in favour of incorporating fiction into L2 education is that the language is more authentic. English is associated with so many cultures that even those who speak it as their L1 may struggle to comprehend the racecourse in a culture other than their own. Simple examples being acknowledging status through respectful forms of address. Whilst we do not subscribe to the idea that literature should be taught solely for the purpose of honing language skills and sharing cultural knowledge, it undeniably provides ‘windows’ (c.f. Sims Bishop, 1982) into both.

The work of the classic reader-response critics like Stanley Fish (1990) highlighted the variety of interpretations offered by readers of the same literary work. At the same time, Wolfgang Iser and his colleagues (1978) demonstrated how texts limit the range of reasonable expectations. More recently, Toolan’s (2016) corpus linguistics approach has clarified the complexity of story interpretation as readers need to recognise patterns in language, and combine the information using empathy and emotional engagement. Fish, Iser, Toolan and others working within reader response are primarily concerned with the task of meaning-formation, whereas Louise Rosenblatt (1978) highlights the educational implications. She distinguishes ‘efferent’ reading for information from ‘aesthetic’ reading for the pleasure. She acknowledges that most reading combines aesthetic and efferent skills, but criticises teachers who pose efferent questions about literature. She argues forcefully for the use of aesthetic tasks (such as story completion) in classrooms. Pope’s work on textual inventions provides a concrete guide as to how this might work in practice. Issues of deixis are the first Pope addresses, and each of his chapters includes interventions into the deictic centre, albeit not labelled in this way. In sum, the capacity for understanding another’s point of view lies at the centre of *writingandreading* fiction.

The criteria for creativity – novelty, quality and relevance – are also relevant for evaluating responses to literary texts. These parameters demand cognitive skills that are under-researched in relation to second language acquisition: empathy and mimicry. Empathy is a meta-cognitive skill that demands the capacity to simultaneously view a situation from both one’s own and another’s point of view, that is, ‘Theory of Mind’ (ToM). Like ToM, mimicry also requires close observation. The pupils needed to observe Rushdie’s language style and vocabulary in order to reproduce something similar. Both empathy and mimicry are deeply creative acts. Empathy is more easily recognised as being creative, but we also argue that the creative recycling of language is a key component of language learning and should receive more attention. However, we also note that pupils may recognise the conventions of the short story form, without empathising with the characters, engaging emotionally with the setting or imitating Rushdie’s style.

Readers familiar with research on creativity will already have noticed that we are concerned with ‘small-c’ creativity, pithily characterised by Ron Carter as “not a capacity of special people but a special capacity of all people” (2004: 13). Research on creativity, like

creativity itself, is highly dependent on the circumstances in which it emerges (Runco and Albert, 2010). Moreover, as *The International Handbook of Creativity* makes clear, creativity is also culturally and linguistically specific (Kaufman and Sternberg, 2006). Aaron Kozbelt, Ronald Beghetto and Mark Runco (2010) identify ten major schools of creativity theory, and still modestly comment on the shortcomings of their overview. Here we must restrict ourselves to considering only cognitive theories of creativity that can help us interpret the learning that has taken place when pupils wrote their endings to Rushdie's story.

We will examine both empathy and mimicry in the pupils' essays shortly, but first we examine story-endings that do not follow the specific affordances of Rushdie's text, even though they do display familiarity with the short story conventions. Kozbelt, Beghetto and Runco (2010: 22) clarify why and how researchers interested in creativity should balance the need for empirically falsifiable hypotheses with conjecture that goes beyond that which can be directly observed. They suggest that "only rather narrow aspects of creativity are readily understandable in terms of empirically falsifiable hypotheses" and that restricting research to the observable would "be overly restrictive" as researchers might "lose sight of important issues and potential connections" (Kozbelt, Beghetto and Runco, 2010: 23). Whilst reviewing story-endings that lack empathy or mimicry does not constitute an empirical test of a hypothesis, we aim to provide sufficient evidence to enable readers to judge for themselves. Thereafter, we ground our arguments in texts in which the pupils appear to have made the empathetic leap necessary to place themselves in the characters' situations, and follow up by examining texts in which pupils attempt to mimic Rushdie's narrative style.

### **Failures of Feeling**

Although the pleasures of engaging with the mind of a fictional character have been extensively studied in recent years (e.g. Keen, 2007; Vermeule 2010), the failure to do so has received much less attention. We begin by examining stories evidencing such failures. We could trivialise these story-endings by suggesting that the pupils did not take the task seriously, were lazy or that they did not understand Rushdie's story and/or the task. Not only do such explanations unhelpfully shut down the conversation, they do not fit the evidence. Many of these stories have been crafted with a great deal of effort, and all show familiarity with the genre of the short story. Observations during the classes and the complexity of the pupils' texts indicate personal investment in their writing. Evidence that pupils misunderstood 'Rubies' exists, so determining precisely what caused the confusion is also valuable.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam proposes that failure functions as a form of norm critique. His study draws heavily on examinations of animation films for children, which he argues provide sites for zaniness, humour and playfulness to resist the pressure to conform. Our data does not allow us to determine whether or not the teenagers' story-endings are picking up on the patterns Halberstam identifies. What we take from Halberstam is the idea that – by deliberately rejecting the story – the pupils are critiquing Rushdie's story and/or the writing task. Let us start with an example of one of the violent endings from Mark.

Rehana se the buss Is coming she stands up and go in to the buss. The door closes behind her. A man comes up to. The man is holding a cloth with chloroform



and put it on her mouth.

Rehana wakes up in a random hotel room and she hear a familiar voice ... Muhammed comes in and says I have never met a women like you. Muhammed is walking to her and touch on her lip. (Mark)

Rushdie's text has clearly indicated that Ali is an untrustworthy character who preys on women. The text reveals that he normally checks that they have come from far away "before beginning to trick them—so even when they discovered they had been swindled they were unlikely to return" (1994: 10). However, there is nothing in Rushdie's text to indicate that Ali is violent: on the contrary, the text notes that Ali is an old man with grey hair. Ali's thoughts are not violent either: "Her innocence made him shiver with fear for her" (1994: 9). Although sufficiently limber to sit cross-legged, Ali is not described as having the physical strength to attack anyone. In Mark's story, Ali appears not to have kidnapped Miss Rehana himself, he appears to be a gang leader.

As the numerous spelling errors, grammatical infelicities and mostly simple vocabulary ('chloroform' being a notable exception) indicate, Mark is not particularly proficient in English. Nevertheless, he displays considerable familiarity with the short story genre: he recycles elements from Rushdie's description (e.g. the bus), and provides a moment-of-truth and plot twist through a kidnap, attempted rape/murder and the timely arrival of the police. The result is conventional, drawing on scripts from crime TV and Western stereotypes concerning arranged marriages. It demonstrates a failure to notice the unreliable nature of focalization, which is the key to Rushdie's story. Mark also fails to pick up on Rushdie's characterization: Mark's Ali is far more threatening than Rushdie's.

Juli-Anna Aerila (2010) has also used story-endings to assess pupils' comprehension of fiction. Her work focuses on the racism evident in such writing, which may explain the frequency with which violence appeared in our sample. Some of the more bizarre plot-twists – such as Miss Rehana being "a bio-terrorist wanting nothing else than to spread the epidemic of ebola" (Viljam) – are most easily understood as a lack of knowledge about life in Pakistan resulting in racist assumptions. However, the interviews held with nine of the pupils after the task did not confirm this. On the contrary, comments such "but she has a fiancé, so she must be in love" were made, suggesting the inability to recognize that arranged marriages are not based on romantic attachment. The information that the marriage was arranged when Miss Rehana was a child, and that she has not met her fiancé, does not appear in the segment the pupils read before writing their endings, although they had read Rushdie's ending before the interviews. The pupil's comment is also interesting in the way it resists Rushdie's denouement in favour of her own solution; even pupils who misunderstood basic concepts still committed themselves to the writing task.

Another pupil, Anders, also depicts Ali threatening Miss Rehana with a "a dirty, rugged knife which he had previously used for opening document papers", which he thrusts into her abdomen. As she dies, Miss "Rehana was smiling, almost as she knew exactly what was going to happen all along", whereas Ali is filled with mixed feelings stemming from his love and jealousy, and then his regrets over killing the woman he loves. Anders concludes his story with the remark "(No I'm not sadistic, I just like drama) heh". Like Mark, Anders

has picked up on details from Rushdie's opening (Anders highlights the documents, Mark the bus). He has also picked up on Ali's mixed feelings. Rushdie's character is fascinated by Miss Rehana, and recognizes that he is acting out of character by waiting for her to come out of the embassy. The violence may reflect Anders's love of "drama", and perhaps his stereotypical views of arranged marriages more than his reading of Rushdie's story. But if, nodding to Halberstam, we read this as a critique of the teaching situation, Anders may be asking for more action-filled texts in the classroom or questioning the liberal stance of the Swedish curriculum. In the opposite direction, four of the story-endings describe Miss Rehana and Ali forming a romantic relationship, and many have affectionate hugs, celebratory dinners and other so on, which are not foreshadowed in Rushdie's text. These endings also indicate an (unsurprising) lack of knowledge of Pakistani culture, and a romanticised interpretation of Ali's fascination with Miss Rehana.

Not all the stories can relevantly be understood as critiques of the text and/or task: some can be understood far more simply. Above, we suggested that Muhammad Ali's violence and Miss Rehana's assertiveness may derive from association of the names of the boxer and the singer. For instance, Fenella's story-ending figures Miss Rehana responding to the invasive questions at the embassy with anger: "The 'real' Rehana was back. I shout to the men that they have no right to ask me this types of question". In response, the officials are delighted:

'Finally!', one of the men yelled. Finally a women who stand up for her dignity. All the other girls are just sitting there as fools and answers on these silly questions. Here you have your passage to England, good luck and don't stop believing on yourself.  
(Fenella)

This celebration of girl power aligns with the singer, Rihanna's, advocacy work and perhaps the quiet confidence of Rushdie's Miss Rehana, but demonstrates a total lack of experience concerning the workings of an embassy.

Nina's text also appears to be more influenced by Rihanna than Rushdie's Miss Rehana:

Rehana replied "The stupid as holes didn't beat me. They did not take my dignity. I stood up for myself and didn't let them into my personal life. I only answered to questions that could have to do with the traveling." ... The last thing I said to them after they had giving me the permission and passport were "you all are just big fucking as holes. ... Then I just turned around and walked certainly through the door with a big smile on my face."  
(Nina)

Nina's solution provides an explanation as to how the smile appeared on Miss Rehana's face, but fails to recognise both the way in which Miss Rehana has been characterised and Rushdie's style of writing. Words like 'asshole' ("as hole" in Nina's rendition) have not been inspired by Rushdie. The larger data set from which these stories were drawn included many instances when the interpretation of a story was heavily influenced by a single word. For instance, the African American term of endearment – 'sister' – was interpreted literally as though the character was talking to a sibling, which completely changed the perspective.

In terms of creativity, story completion tasks define 'relevance' as picking up features such as characterisation (including their style of speech evident in the dialogue), narrative

style, and focalisation. In this context, imitation is highly desirable. However, even those story-endings that did not mimic Rushdie's text, displayed genre mimicry and a willingness to commit to the task. The following two sections are centred on story-endings that demonstrated more sophisticated engagement with Rushdie's characters and writing style.

### **Empathy as a form of cognition**

Cognitive and emotional engagement with fictional characters is an essential component in literary meaning-making (Keen, 2007; Zunshine, 2006; Burke 2011). For this reason, reading fiction is believed to promote the development of ToM in no small part because it demands shifting the deictic centre (see e.g. Nikolajeva, 2014: 75; Hogan, 2011). Unlike real-life situations, deictic shifts are often accompanied by direct access into what the characters are thinking, thereby providing readers with feedback on the accuracy of their ToM skills. Lisa Zunshine explains the connection between ToM and readers' engagement with fictional characters as follows:

The very process of making sense of what we read appears to be grounded in our ability to invest the flimsy verbal constructions that we generally call "characters" with a potential for a variety of thoughts, feelings, and desires and then look for the "cues" that would allow us to guess at their feelings and thus predict their actions. Literature pervasively capitalizes on and stimulates Theory of Mind mechanisms that had evolved to deal with real people, even as on some level readers do remain aware that fictive characters are not real people at all.

(Zunshine, 2006: 10)

Following Zunshine, one reason for reading fiction set in the cultures where the TL is spoken is that it provides readers with opportunities to recognise how culturally specific ways of behaving reveal what people are thinking. For instance, looking away when someone attempts mutual eye-gaze may variously be interpreted as politeness, modesty, shame, lack of interest or disagreement. The correct interpretation of the person's mental state demands knowledge of cultural norms. Returning to the schema of arranged marriages, Rushdie's twist is to highlight Miss Rehana's desire to honour her parents' wishes: an aspect of arranged marriages that Ali and most readers will overlook.

Rushdie's text offers particularly rich ground for the development of ToM. Readers do not gain access to Miss Rehana's mind, but are provided with detailed descriptions of her face, especially her lips and eyes. Readers observe the impact she has on the bus-driver and the embassy guard before experiencing a similar impact on Muhammad Ali, whose interior world readers are invited to share. This pattern encourages readers to assume that Ali is skilled in ToM, not least because he makes his living as a confidence trickster. Ali gradually realises that Miss Rehana finds his attempts to trick her amusing. Perceptive readers will also note clues in the way she eats her pakhoras: "She followed, continuing to eat pakoras from a little newspaper packet. She did not offer him any" (Rushdie 1994:7). The Swedish teens we cite would have been used to the idea of sharing food on a smorgasbord, but not once the food has been selected. The observation that "She did not offer him any" might seem odd to a Swedish reader, who would not expect to share food with a stranger. The fact that Rushdie comments on the behaviour suggests that *failing* to share pakhoras is odd. It

reflects the way Miss Rehana keeps her thoughts to herself. At the end of Rushdie's story, when she shares the story of her childhood engagement, she also shares her food.

This capacity to identify actions from which a person's thoughts can be inferred is primarily a result of functions in the brain's right hemisphere. Iain McGilchrist's (2009) broad-ranging discussion of brain lateralisation (dividing functions into the left and right hemisphere), *The Master and his Emissary*, dismisses the pop-science view that functions (such as creativity) are a propensity of just one hemisphere. McGilchrist clarifies how the two halves collaborate on *all* tasks, but also inhibit one another. For instance, the right lateral prefrontal cortex is needed to inhibit the automatic tendency to see matters from one's own point of view, and thus enables empathy (Ruby and Decety 2001). McGilchrist proposes that the functions of the two halves are best understood as types of attention, and characterises the right hemisphere's disposition as caring, predominantly concerned with relationships: "The right hemisphere's gaze is intrinsically empathetic, by contrast [to the left hemisphere], and acknowledges the *inevitability* of 'betweenness'" (2009: 166). In contrast, he characterises the left hemisphere's functioning as follows:

The left hemisphere deals with what it knows, and therefore prioritises the expected – its process is predictive. It positively prefers what it knows. This makes it more efficient in routine situations where things are predictable, but less efficient than the right [hemisphere] wherever the initial assumptions have to be revised, or when there is a need to distinguish old information from new material that may be consistent with it. (McGilchrist, 2009: 40)

Empathy and mimicry thus draw on types of attention that are favoured by one of the hemispheres, but are held in check by the other.

The lateralization of the brain is particularly significant during childhood and adolescence. Infants rely more heavily on the right hemisphere, but the left hemisphere rapidly learns to categorise information in ways that can speed decision making (McGilchrist 2009: 359ff). The binary opposition – 'us' and 'them' – is one of the first cognitive patterns infants learn, after which things that resemble the familiar are deemed 'safe', and thus require less specific attention when we are in attention-demanding situations (Tenngart 2012: 26). New and unfamiliar things may entail danger, and so the right hemisphere's attention is drawn to trying to predict what will happen next. This is especially true when observing other humans, including fictional humans (Stockwell 2019: 75–77). Other categories follow, but the simple binaries are powerful tools. Unfortunately, as the citation from McGilchrist highlights, once categories have been formed there are many situations when their simplicity is inefficient. Most notably, this happens when a fear reaction is triggered by a person who appears to be 'unlike us' based solely on their visual appearance, resulting in racism (Kokkola and Van den Bossche 2020).

L2 learning along with learning more about the cultures in which the target language is spoken involves empathising with cultural others. It thus demands the kind of empathetic gaze favoured by the right hemisphere to overcome the recognition of otherness favoured by the left hemisphere. Returning to our study, the pupils are at the age when synaptic pruning – the streamlining of neurological pathways – is at its strongest. The more empathy with

cultural others gained prior to this pruning, the easier it will be for the right hemisphere to mitigate the categorizing attention of the left. Neither the characters in Rushdie's story, nor their life situations were likely to be familiar to the Swedish teens. Miss Rehana and Muhammad Ali are certainly 'other', which forces the teens to draw on experience gained from TV, literature and film to pay the kind of attention needed for empathy. As noted above, there were numerous instances when this resulted in outcomes that were not anticipated in Rushdie's text. Nevertheless, many of the pupils demonstrated the capacity to imagine themselves into the characters' personalities and life-situations to produce endings that displayed ToM, including those that ended with a righting of wrongs such as the following two from Beatrice and David.

<b>Beatrice</b>	<b>David</b>
I started to feel bad about my business after i met Miss Rehana, and I understood that I could have taken her future away from her, so that she couldn't return to England. I started to think less about money, and more about the people that I fooled. And I'm still surprised that the short meeting that I had with Miss Rehana, could change my view on life.	Muhammed had been up all night trying to better understand what he was actually doing, He was a trickster that "stole" money from insecure people but he had never tricked a confident person like Rehana simply because they just ignore him and his advice but Rehana had still gone with Muhammed and listened to his advice, he was the one who got tricked this time and he couldn't stand it.

Beatrice picks up on Ali's fascination with Miss Rehana, and accepts it at face value. She adopts Ali's perspective, but allows even greater insight into the character by narrating the ending in his voice. In her portrayal, Ali's recognition of the impact of his business on the lives of the women he tricks leads him to question his actions. The story then becomes a morality tale about the lasting consequences of his brief encounter with Miss Rehana. David's text also portrays Ali contemplating his behaviour as a trickster. Like Rushdie, David presents Ali in the third person, but provides readers with access to the character's complex, mixed emotions. The unpleasant experience of being tricked leads David's version of Ali to work recognise how his people have been held down by colonial forces. He decides to "help people to become as confident as she was, aye she was his inspiration for opening the first Indian boarding school and revolutionize the system of this caste". In both Beatrice's and David's story-endings, the short-story convention of the plot twist is evident.

Rushdie's twist in the ending relies on ToM for effect. By focalising through Ali, Rushdie encourages readers to share the old man's interpretations of Miss Rehana's face. As readers, we observe Ali's endeavours to interpret her eyes to see whether she is laughing at him. Tommy picks up on Rushdie's technique of describing characters' faces and actions to produce an ending which is remarkably close to the original.

<b>Tommy</b>
'I want to thank you for your advice. And I need you to forgive me for being so rude'. Muhammad looked at her with a very confused look on his face. 'I thought you didn't like my advice' he says, still looking like a question mark. Miss Rehana suddenly speaks. 'It was an arranged engagement. My parents decided who I was go-

ing to marry when I was just a child'. She said. 'They wanted someone that would be able to take care of me'. Muhammad Ali looked even more like a question mark right now. ...

[Miss Rehana explains she is not going to England.]

'I failed the test. I answered all the questions wrong.'... 'I like it here. I can find a good job and live a happy life without that old fool Mustafa.' She said, still looking very calm.

It is possible that Tommy looked up Rushdie's story whilst working on his assignment, however, we consider this unlikely both due to the classroom situation and due to the decidedly different style of writing (e.g. "looking like a question mark"). If he wanted to copy the ending, he would probably have copied more. A more reasonable interpretation is that Tommy is sensitive to the convention of the plot twist and has recognised that the reader is being guided to adopt the same viewpoint as Muhammad Ali. Like Rushdie, Tommy then twists the tale by revealing Ali's failed ToM. In short, despite his lack of sensitivity to many aspects of style, Tommy appears to be highly empathetic to the characters. In the following section, we examine writing that is more imitative, but not necessarily as strong on ToM.

### **Mimicry as a form of cognition**

Imitation is supposedly the sincerest form of flattery because it demonstrates the willingness to invest so heavily in the original that one can emulate it. It is a skill that demands the cognitive skills of identifying and comprehending so well that reproduction is possible. Nevertheless, imitation is rarely considered creative. Sternberg, Kaufman and Pretz's (2002) propulsion model of creativity situates reproduction at the least creative end of the scale, followed by forward incrementation and reinitiation which move the domain away from existing starting points. The model values novelty more than imitation. However, in a review of research on the place of imitation in creativity, Ward and Kolomyts (2010) cite empirical studies of tasks such as imagining life on another planet showed that participants showed more divergent thinking ('novelty') when asked to take abstract attributes (such as the need for nutrition) into account. In short, the studies reviewed by Ward and Kolomyts (2010: 99-102) indicate that people tend to be *more* creative when their attention has been drawn towards aspects of relevance. However, when literature is being imitated, mimicry is easily labelled 'plagiarism'.

The verbatim copying of texts is considered a serious offence, an endeavour to cheat or to advance oneself by using another person's hard work. Those interested in the phenomenon of plagiarism, especially among L2 writers, note that it is impossible to discern the intentions behind copying behaviour from the texts they produce (e.g. Pecorari, 2003). In recent years, however, the notion of 'patchwriting' has emerged to acknowledge that many people who recycle texts do so without the intention of cheating (Howard 1995; Howard, Serviss & Rodrigue, 2010). Here we set aside the negative implications associated with plagiarism to embrace the idea that mimicry is a means by which learning takes place.

In L2 education, the verbatim learning of stock phrases from responses to teachers' greetings to the drilling of formulaic phrases in the audiolingual method have an established place, albeit one that is disdained in the Swedish context. Nevertheless, mimicry in the sense of linguistic alignment is highly valued. We use the term 'linguistic alignment' broadly to refer to the way conversational partners will pick up on aspects of one another's speech

to either signal solidarity (through mimicry) or distance. Alignment can be evident through register, word choice, syntax, pronunciation and more. As Reihane Boghrati et al observe, “linguistic choices are critical components of a range of social interactions from group formation and maintenance ... to sparking romance ... and successful negotiations” (2018: 1055). In short, mimicry is highly valued aspect of communication in L1 settings. When understood in this way, the recognition and creative reuse of linguistic elements by L2 learners is important for communicative competence.

Many pupils mimicked Rushdie’s adoption of Muhammad Ali’s perspective. This resulted in descriptions of Miss Rehana’s smile, her eyes and repetitions of Rushdie’s descriptions of the setting. Some of the stories with outcomes unanticipated from Rushdie’s text reused Rushdie-specific expressions such as ‘Tuesday women’ and ‘lala’. As a result, some of the best texts were also those that were most imitative. Consider, for example, the two extracts from Linda and Harriet below.

<b>Linda</b>	<b>Harriet</b>
<p>“You look happy Miss Rehana. I suspect you got a yes,” he said and he couldn’t be happier for her. The young lady continued to smile. She shook her head and said “No, I didn’t get a yes”.</p> <p>Muhammad Ali got confused. Why was she happy if she got a no? ...</p> <p>“I never wanted a yes, old man. I already knew it was Bradford, England, and not Bradford, London. I failed on purpose. I never wanted to go to Bradford. I don’t want to live my life with a man I know nothing about. That’s why I didn’t want your help, because it wouldn’t be help to me. I am my own person and I want to make my own decisions. It was never my decision to marry Mustafa Dar. It was made by my parents. I want to find real love and not love that has been forced on me by someone else.”</p>	<p>She continued to smile while she said “the sparrow is going to Bradford, London and the hawks believed me”. “Bradford, England” Muhammad Ali said with a smile.</p> <p>Apparently Miss Rehana and her fiancée had answered the questions in the same way and the sahibs knew that she had showed up to the British Embassy without a brother or an uncle, without any shoulder to hold her up.</p> <p>Muhammad Ali stayed in his dusty corner and continued gulling the Tuesday-Women, but he would never meet someone with as beautiful eyes or as beautiful as Miss Rehana.</p>

Linda, like Tommy, produces the same outcome as Rushdie. These were the only two in the sample to do so. We quote them both because they demonstrate such sensitivity to Rushdie’s story and also, in Linda’s case, the writing style. Like Tommy, it is highly unlikely that Linda accessed the original, and in any case her reasoning (searching for “real love”) differs markedly. Linda’s writing unsurprisingly falls short the internationally acclaimed standard Rushdie has set, but her Miss Rehana retains a quiet dignity: no one is “looking like a question mark” here!

Harriet has recycled many words she has learned from Rushdie’s story, such as, ‘Tuesday-women’ and ‘sahib’. Her bird imagery comes from Rushdie’s description of Ali telling Miss Rehana about the men in the embassy: “She was a sparrow, he told her, and they were men with hooded eyes, like hawks” (1994: 9). Harriet’s version of recycles this imagery: she accepts that she was a sparrow, but she has outwitted the hawks. Note also how Harriet also portrays Miss Rehana as beautiful and focuses on her eyes, like Rushdie. Harriet picks

up on the detail that Miss Rehana has arrived alone, without male relatives, and uses this to explain the young woman's success. Both Harriet's characters smile, while Rushdie only describes Miss Rehana as smiling.

Despite their obviously novice status as writers, Linda and Harriet are clearly trying to align their language with Rushdie's. This is known as 'social signalling' which is a factor in a number of theories reviewed by Boghrati et al:

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT; Giles, 2008) and the interactive alignment model (Pickering and Garrod 2004) ... and other related theories posit that we adjust our verbal and non-verbal behaviors to maximize similarities between ourselves and others when we want to signal solidarity, and we maximize linguistic differences when trying to push others away (Shepard, Giles, & Le Poire, 2001).  
(Boghrati et al 2018: 1056)

The teenage Swedes in this study obviously do not have the capacity to fully align their production with Rushdie, and we doubt that many L1 English speakers could either. Nevertheless, they are sensitive to many features of Rushdie's language and can social signal through their imitation of narrative perspective, word choices, imagery and even narrative outcome. These are major achievements for 15-year-olds writing in their second language.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This study has investigated how a simple textual intervention in an L2 English classroom setting has promoted creative cognition. It has established that the Swedish teenagers were familiar with the genre expectations of short stories, and were – without exception – able to create endings that made use of either a moment-of-truth or an exemplum (Pratt 1981: 75). And whilst some pupils created story-endings that did not fit well with the expectations set up by Rushdie, even these 'failed' texts showed evidence of creative cognition. Bringing in the characteristics of the boxer, Mohammad Ali, and the singer Rihanna into the story required considerable ingenuity!

The analyses of the pupils' texts had two foci: 1) the development of ToM when responding to the characters' situation and 2) the recycling of elements in Rushdie's story as a form of social signalling. ToM and imitation are rarely considered to be creative skills, but we have suggested that both are helpfully understood in this light, and evaluated in terms of novelty, quality and relevance. Imagining oneself into an unfamiliar perspective requires considerable ingenuity, even when the results might not seem particularly original from a member of that community. Determining what elements need to be recycled in order for the ensuing text to seem relevant is a demanding cognitive task. Both ToM and mimicry require acute observation, good language skills and creativity.

Fiction proffers opportunities for lengthy excursions into the feelings and thoughts of others, which is why it is believed to support the development of empathy (Keen, 2007; Vermeule 2010, Zunshine 2006). The task of producing a story-ending challenged the pupils to imagine themselves into circumstances decidedly unlike their own. When reading fiction, the capacity to predict the character's feelings or behaviours might be used as a measure of quality, although some of the delight of reading literature lies in the thrill of the unexpected. Relevance could be considered in terms of how the interpretation of the character accords



with other information in the text. In this case, the pupils not only had to contend with the difficulties of reading in a second language, they also had to interpret actions they have not experienced (e.g. applying for a visa; arranged marriage). None of the pupils asked about how one applies for a visa during the lesson. Instead, they built their interpretations on information found in ‘Rubies’. Whilst this shows that they could pay attention to the text, it also reveals how easily cultural misconceptions are formed. The fictional Ali’s examples of invasive interview questions were taken as an accurate account of what happens during the process of applying for a visa, rather than as a means of testing whether (from a British perspective) the marriage is ‘real’. This was the only text set in Pakistan the pupils read during this final compulsory course in English. Reading it as fact rather than fiction may have had unintended, racist consequences.

Moreover, the text also contained actions the pupils have experienced, but their texts suggest that they were unaware that there might be culturally specific variants (e.g. eating and sharing street-food). Nevertheless, many pupils were able to identify and mimic features of Rushdie’s writing style. The pupils were able to identify imagery (the use of bird images), aspects of characterisation (smiling and eye-gaze), descriptions of objects (knives, the bus) and recycle them in a way that signalled linguistic alignment. They were endeavouring to enter the world of Rushdie’s characters.

We hope this analysis demonstrates that creative cognition is not an additional extra in the learning of a foreign language: empathy and mimicry are central to communication. And we also hope that the value of textual interventions into literary texts are further affirmed by this analysis.

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