IMPLEMENTING CREATIVE WRITING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING CLASSROOMS

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Abstract. Creative writing in English has many advantages for EFL/ESL students, including the expansion of their literature knowledge, the application of classroom language skills, and the acquisition of new vocabulary and language structures. In English language teaching classes, students are encouraged to learn English by participating in creative writing activities. Even if you don't have access to a creative writing class, you can still incorporate it into other ESL classes. This article provides an outline of one method for having students produce stories that grow in scaffolded stages, from concept to words to lines, then story, following a brief discussion of the nature of creative writing. Students say that the process is interesting and not scary, and that telling their stories helps them feel more confident.

Keywords: creative writing, ESL, EFL, literature, process, scaffolding, stories

ВНЕДРЕНИЕ ТВОРЧЕСКОГО ПИСЬМА В КЛАССАХ ОБУЧЕНИЯ АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ

Аннотация. Творческое письмо на английском языке имеет много преимуществ для учащихся EFL/ESL, в том числе расширение их литературных знаний, применение языковых навыков в классе и приобретение нового словарного запаса и языковых структур. На уроках английского языка учащимся предлагается изучать английский язык, участвуя в творческой письменной деятельности. Даже если у вас нет доступа к классу творческого письма, вы все равно можете включить его в другие классы ESL. В этой статье представлен план одного из методов, позволяющих учащимся создавать рассказы, которые развиваются поэтапно, от концепции к словам, к строкам, а затем к рассказу после краткого обсуждения природы творческого письма. Студенты говорят, что процесс интересный и не страшный, а рассказывая свои истории, они чувствуют себя увереннее.

Ключевые слова: творческое письмо, ESL, EFL, литература, процесс, строительные леса, рассказы.

Introduction

"Why is it that most institutional systems of education develop such narrow and unadventurous teaching procedures?" Maley (2012) asks in his article titled "Creative Writing for Students and Teachers" (para.1). Even in small doses, creative writing (CW) is uncommon in ELT. He continues by stating that students frequently "develop a lifelong aversion to the language" when language instruction is not creative (para. 1). Similar to Maley, an increasing number of ELT educators are advocating for the use of CW in ELT. Students gain a deeper understanding of the art of fiction, have the opportunity to utilize their existing language skills, and are encouraged to investigate vocabulary and grammar that they might not have considered

otherwise by having them write stories in English. "I have found that the vocabulary use in fiction writing appears to be more varied and of higher quality than academic writing produced by the same students," states Smith (2013) in his experience teaching CW in ELT (p. 15).

Students who write stories for others also tend to use natural language structures and develop a voice that is more natural, despite being written in English as a foreign language. Students gain self-confidence and grow as writers and English speakers when they are encouraged to write about their thoughts and feelings: Students' self-esteem and language proficiency rise when they are encouraged to break away from the textbook method of learning through repetition (Rowlands, 2012, para. 6). Students are delighted to explore personal reflection and creative endeavor in a break from textbooks and formal writing. Therefore, creative writing has numerous advantages, such as expanding one's vocabulary (Ying, 2008) and participating in language play to "express uniquely personal meanings" (Maley, 2009, para. 3).

Lima (2013) discusses the recent trend of including CW in ELT in her review of Writing Poems and Writing Stories (Maley & Mukundan, 2011; also see Frank & Rinvolucri, 2007; 2008, Wright and Hill) In fact, schools are offering full-semester EFL/ESL courses in creative writing, making it a more prominent part of English as a Second Language (ELT).1 CW has also been shown to help writers become more competent and confident in academic writing. "All of the students felt that their academic writing had improved" in an ESL CW program at a large midwestern university in the United States (Ostrow and Chang, 2012, p. 48).

Creative writing, in contrast to the academic prose that English language students typically write in their university classes, tries more explicitly to visually engage both the writer and the reader. There has been a "revival" of creative writing (Maley, 2012, p. 561), with many educators realizing that "creativity is a fundamental aspect of education and should be promoted accordingly" (Stillar, 2013, citing Engle, 1999, p. 165), despite the opposition of some teachers to including it in language classes. Despite the fact that numerous educators demonstrate the importance of CW in ELT (Franz, 2005, p. 17; Keplinger, 2001), and an increasing number of teachers (Apple, 2004; 2013 by Holthouse and Marlowe; Sano, 2004) simply choose to assume the significance of CW in ELT, avoiding the initial defense of CW and focusing solely on techniques.

Creative writing is often thought of as hairwrenching exercises, undertaken by driven solitary writers; however, in a relaxed, non-threatening atmosphere, English language learners can smoothly produce poems, stories and dialogues. The words creative writing may connote stories and poems, however dialogues, journals, web texts, and so forth could also be included. Having very limited time for creative writing in my class, I employed a step-by-step method for creative writing which could be finished in short periods of time in class, with some writing, and reading of original texts, done as homework. Although this exercise was conducted in a small sophomore seminar (Japanese 'zemi') majoring in English and American studies, it could readily be applied to larger classes and all grades levels, with learners at most levels of language competence. These seminar students were of varied ability from basic to pre-intermediate level. Having students of very different skill levels is a common situation at smaller colleges and universities, and is often viewed as a problem. However, in this CW exercise, I found the differing levels posed no problems. Ross (2007) came to the same conclusion: "while students come to class with various levels of language proficiency, creative writing offers an avenue for all students to improve their English writing skills" (p.14). The seminar focuses on literature and

culture in Anglophone countries. It is fortunately scheduled in a CALL lab, and meets once a week, across a 15-week semester. In our department, there are no classes in creative writing or drama. Classes are overwhelmingly focused primarily on academic studies, and students rarely if ever have opportunities to explore the world in creative ways. However, it is usually possible, with some effort, to shoehorn such classes into the curriculum, or at least a unit or two, as in this case.

Overview of the writing process

This genre-approach exercise was completed over a four-week period, using between 10-20 minutes of each class, with homework assigned for each class. The initial instructions for each step were very general, and simple in form, and students were simply asked to write. Overall, the focus was on content rather than form. For the initial steps in this process, there was little correction or revision, a strategy also followed by the Hong Kong teachers (Burton 2010, p. 502) and by Zemach (2008). Each step was designed to allow students the freedom to explore, and to find their own voice, an important aspect of CW for the EFL writer (Stewart, 2010. p.270). The discrete steps involved were as follows:

a. hold a conversation on personal topics;
b. choose one meaningful word;
c. write lines from this word;
d. write a story from the lines;
e. expand the story using sensory details;
f. expand further using dialogue.

As part of this writing exercise, the class examined poetry, myth, story and drama from our class textbook, Voices in Literature (McCloskey and Stack, 1993). The process began with conversation in English, which led to simple words written down. Each word produced more words. These words became free verse, which then became a (very) short story. The story was then fleshed out, adding sensory details and dialogue. At each stage of the process, students read their writing aloud in a group.

The process begins with rather casual conversation in English, students talking about what they experienced during the week, in order to elicit events, places, and people that they care about. The next step is to have them choose a word that describes something important to them. This could be something like their workplace, a hobby, an important personal article, and so forth. Students wrote down their interests—fashion, coffee, driving, apple pie, Rock City (a workplace). Having students simply write or type (some students were using MS Word) a single word allows them to overcome an often difficult hurdle—"perhaps the biggest challenge any writer has to overcome: the blank page" (Lima, 2013, p. 148). Once students have begun the process of CW, they can continue the process through a series of scaffolding techniques.

Expanding From letters, to words and lines

In each stage of the process, the instructor provided examples of how the students could proceed. At the first stage, the discussion in English, they discovered the instructor liked bluegrass music. The instructor then wrote the primary word bluegrass vertically on the paper, and added words associated with bluegrass:

B bass L laugh U upbeat E energetic G gritty R raucous A alive S simple S solid

This technique of writing words, then lines from a topic word has been a common technique at least since this writer was in graduate school in the 1970's, later rather dubiously

christened "acrostic poem writing," and is still current, described by Holmes and Moulton (2001) and utilized by teacher X as a "a form students could easily handle" (Burton, 2010, p. 500). Using the term "line" instead of "sentence," releases the students from any preconceived or pretaught forms, and allows them to freely write in word groups and phrases, avoiding (at least for the moment) the problem of form (see also Duppenthaler, 2006. p.19). Writing lines that contain these words relevant to the topic is the next step in the process. During each class in the process, students were reading poems and songs from the textbook, for example. "Here Comes the Sun," by George Harrison (p. 17), "There Are No People Song," Navajo Chant (p. 43). They were not asked to model their lines after anything they read, but were only exposed to a poetic ambience in the classroom.

Having the teacher write together with students is instructive and important (Maley, 2012), therefore I wrote example lines from bluegrass, shown on the center computer displays:

"The sound of **b**luegrass guitar or banjo, mandolin, bass or fiddle

Leaves me laughing, or deep in thought

The **u**pbeat melodies cut through smoke and noise

Each player is in full **e**nergetic mode

The notes are pure, yet **g**ritty, like the earth

The night turns **r**aucous, people are moving

I feel I'm becoming more **a**live, more awake

The melodies are **s**imple, yet deep

Bluegrass, with that **s**olid foundation, soars so high

While this may or may not be considered 'poetry', it is evocative and meaningful for the writer, and students see clearly how it may be possible to write lines from their words. Although these lines formed sentences, students were instructed to simply write, in phrases or sentences.

Mapping a story

With these lines in hand, students were given a homework assignment to map out a story from their writing on the associative words. In a previous class, students had mapped out a completed story "The Earth on Turtle's Back," retold by Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac (p. 49), from an exercise in our textbook, (McCloskey and Stack, p. 55). The textbook exercise was to identify major elements of a story—characters, setting, initial event, reaction, goal-setting, attempt to reach goal. In this writing exercise, on the other hand, they were asked to map out a story prior to writing it, rather like making an outline. One student had recently received her driver's license, and mapped her story on buying a new car and beginning to drive:

Characters: *self, father, grandmother, father*

Setting: *driving school, a used-car shop*

Initial event: *attending a driving school*

Reaction: *received a driver's license*

Goal setting: *to drive from hometown to a town 50 kilometers away*

Attempt to reach goal: *grandmother bought her car, in cash*

Outcomes: *I drive the 50-kilometer trip*

Resolution: *I'm living a happy driving life now*.

Her story written later from this map was nonfiction, and she proudly read it to a group she was assigned to.

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