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Teaching Creative Writing in an ESL Context

Simon Kenny

Saitama University

Abstract: In this paper the author will outline some of the main benefits in teaching creative writing to second language learners. After defining the term ‘creative writing’, an assessment of the effects of utilising creative writing processes in the classroom will be made, and examples will be given that focus on writing a short story and using imaginative language. It will be argued that the power of the creative mind can have a large impact in helping to foster better language skills in the ESL classroom.

Keywords: imagination, autonomy, self-exploration, creative mind

Introduction

Creative writing is often overlooked on an ESL curriculum. There may be a variety of reasons for this. Teachers may not know how to actually teach creative writing, and they may consider it somewhat difficult given the nature of the material (e.g. poem, story, or drama). Bishop (1990) asserts that many creative writing instructors are not comfortable, self-analytic writers, and they tend to resist change and hold back creative impulses. In the classroom, Davies (1998) notes that teachers will often use fill-in-the-blank exercises that focus on accuracy rather than composition. Structure-based tasks with a strong grammatical focus are often the norm in many ESL writing classes, and, indeed, in many writing textbooks there is often little scope for using creative writing as the exercises will usually work on repetitive grammar practice, extensive reading, and topics that have little relevance to students. One of the main strengths of creative writing is that it taps in directly to student interior motivations and interests, and essentially, to the power of the imagination.

Despite a reluctance of many teachers and schools in the past to actively implement creative writing into an ESL curriculum, there is a growing interest in this area of study at all levels of education worldwide. Over the years creative writing has been integrated into many English school programs, and with the recent surge in interest in learner autonomy and

student-centred learning, there appears to be more of an interest among administrators and educators to teach creative writing in the classroom.

Definition of Creative Writing

A definition of creative writing could include many things, but the major distinction is that a piece of work will express thoughts, ideas and feelings in an imaginative way. Whereas poems, short stories and screenplays would be considered as creative writing; academic writing, textbooks, and most forms of journalism would not. Using all the five senses in order to create imaginative and creative work is what creative writing is all about, and linking disparate information and ideas that can be used together in one piece of work is of central importance to creative writers. Unlocking the dormant powers of the imagination in the quest for inner exploration and outer expression – attempting to find the correct vehicle from which all of our creative energies and dormant potentialities can be collectively laid forth.

The other major consideration is that creative writing is guided by the author’s own need to express rather than a set structure that typifies expository writing, and almost all kinds of academic writing. Especially within academic fields, writing is ruled by conventions that stipulate how a writer should put forward arguments, considerations and viewpoints, and these are heavily codified and leave very little room for individual expression. As Harper (2006) mentions, creative writing is an intelligent exercise rather than an intellectual one, it is driven by actions, intentions, dispositions and

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influences rather than reasoning (pp. 5-6). Creative writing embraces the individuals' need to move beyond boundaries and consider new ways of thinking. It is exploratory in nature, and self-affirming in the sense that the author is the major driving force in the creative quest.

Reasons for Using Creative Writing

There are some very good reasons for using creative writing in the classroom. I will outline four major points that I believe are important factors when considering the effect of creative writing on second language learning:

1. Freedom of expression

In most writing classes the central focus is on correct form and grammatical structure rather than on utilizing the imagination itself. This lack of emphasis on our major creative faculty can lead to dissonance and low motivational levels, as the student's multiple needs are not being met. Focusing extensively on form can leave little room for the cultivation of views, opinions and ideas. Even though writing textbooks often do have questions related to reading passages, and urge the student to produce feedback on a number of issues and topics, these questions are predetermined and tightly focused on the 'correct answers', and actually more often than not they do not have any link with the students' actual interests and motivations. However, creative writing activities connect directly to the student's imagination, and therefore are useful in allowing for some exploration of interests and ideas in a spontaneous, immediate and personal way. Creative writing then neatly ties in with the latest pedagogical trends within the ESL classroom to place the student at the forefront of the learning process.

Allowing for freedom of expression not only lets the student have more choice but also empowers the student. In normal classroom situations the student often feels that their work needs to fit certain defined criteria, follow teacher instruction on how to do something, and meet key learner objectives. While some form of instruction is vital in the classroom, there is a need for students to be recognized as autonomous, creative

individuals. Giving students a chance to express themselves in a free and spontaneous manner is then important for a more holistic approach to learning a second language.

Students often feel nervous about writing or expressing ideas, and they wonder if the way that they are expressing themselves is the correct way or not, and whether they are meeting teacher expectations. One of the primary tasks of the teacher is to allow students to let go of this fear and inhibition, and to follow their own creative instincts and creative insights.

2. The use of the imagination

The implementation of creative approaches, activities, and tasks that promote the use of the imagination is vital in our development as a human being. Many educational theorists have noted that using the imagination encourages faster and more integrated learning. Green (2000) notes that teachers can open students' minds and inspire them to imagine worlds other than their own through setting up creative processes in the classroom that release the imagination. Allowing the 'inner voice' to be heard and for personal visions to be shared is an important part of establishing a positive working environment that can encourage students to write. Successful learning will usually include a variety of tasks and activities that encourage rational, physical, and imaginative reactions.

Creative writing is a great way to nurture ideas and to develop self-expression. Indeed, the 'self' is of primary importance as it is the source of inspiration for writing creatively, and encourages a shift away from relying on external sources such as the teacher, the textbook or the worksheet. Helping students to access their creative mind can directly actualize the 'self as source'. Self then becomes a primary source, and this can raise motivational levels, encourage good learning habits, and improve students' output as they tap into their own stories and unconscious drives.

3. Emotional response

One of the prime factors in distinguishing creative writing from factual writing is that it can ignite an emotional response in us. We are connecting with our feeling and emotions

directly with the material at hand. Linguists have suggested that facilitating an emotional response can have a beneficial effect on learning of all kinds, as it taps into instinctual drives and motivations at the unconscious level. Skinner (1957) suggests that operant conditioning is an important factor in the way that we process language, and that the educator should be aware of the implications in the classroom of producing emotional responses in students in order to better facilitate and process language skills. In short, teachers should consider ways in which students can emotionally connect with their material and classroom activities.

4. *Connecting the known to the unknown*

Another point when considering the advantages of creative writing is that it can link pre-existing knowledge with new ideas, and as yet unrecognized linguistic structures. In terms of second language acquisition, the actual processing of ideas (the intake) can generate in itself new language and original output. This process cannot be underestimated in terms of encouraging students to take ownership of their own learning. As authentic, original beings, students should be encouraged to access their own original mind in the creation of authentic material that they themselves have created.

One prevailing issue in ESL writing programs is plagiarism - the tendency for students to cut and paste when writing essays and reports. This issue is becoming more pertinent with the rise of the internet, and the use of the internet as a resource both within and without the classroom. Creative writing is a good way in which to encourage students' to use their own ideas in their writing, and it naturally offers multiple avenues for self-exploration and self-expression.

Example: The Short Story

The use of stories and storytelling has been deeply woven into virtually all communities and societies around the world. People like to hear a good story, and on a psychological level, there is often a strong desire within us to express feelings and emotions through words and stories. Helping students to nurture this desire for expression can be extremely

rewarding on a personal, as well as a linguistic level.

Scaffolding is important, as although the teacher should encourage self-expression, there is still a need for some form of instruction and organization. Through outlining the process and giving students clear markers for their creative expression, sustainable and achievable learner goals are possible

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The following is an example of a simple short story that I teach to my writing classes:

1. The Beginning

Outline: You are in a beautiful place. The place is somewhere that you remember well, or where you have enjoyed good moments in the past. Describe the surroundings and the landscape.

The advantage of describing a place that we remember is that the student can easily use their imagination and memory in recalling features and points of interest in this place. This is a good starting point for a short story, as the student is using knowledge (input) that can be readily processed into English words (output).

Teachers can pre-teach vocabulary such as:

Nouns

hill, forest, wood, river, stream, barn

Adjectives

calm, serene, spacious, sunny, tranquil,
old-fashioned

Prepositions of Place

behind, below, above, next to, beyond,
opposite

2. The Difficult Person

Outline: Suddenly, you meet someone who you dislike. Describe why you dislike them and your reaction to seeing them in your special place.

This provides a good opportunity for students to describe their feelings about a person that they might not particularly like. I will often state that they should probably choose someone that they dislike rather than hate. The distinction can be important as if the negative feelings are too strong then this can block student creativity. In novels and short stories there is often a crisis point or tension between characters that defines the story, and this is an important part of both life, and the creative process itself – the reconciliation of difficulties, fears and both common and more deep-seated problems. This is where an atmosphere of positive learning and open enquiry is helpful, as the teacher can become a model for self-expression and personal growth.

Adjectives of Personality

objectionable, temperamental, anxious,
proud, generous, selfish

3. The Interaction

Outline: You begin to talk to the difficult person. Describe your conversation and the interaction between you and this person.

This interaction allows for dialogue based on personal experience as well as imagination – a combination of both the known and unknown. The level of output will likely be high, because there is an emotional connection with the material. Students may need some help with simple dialogue, but the basic structure for dialogue writing can be

pre-taught and introduced earlier in the semester.

4. The Outcome

Outline: Describe the end of your meeting with the difficult person, and how you feel after meeting this person.

Students can consider in their mind's eye how they would feel after a meeting with the difficult person. Would anything have changed? Would they be feeling tense or angry? One point that I tend to stress to students is how people often act differently in completely different situations. For example, the person that we know from high school may behave in a different way in a different place because they are not faced with the same influences, situation and people.

This short story exercise is a good way to engage students' interest, as the options and possible scenarios that they can introduce are numerous. They can also relate their experiences and memories to their imagination, and this provides a framework from which they are able to write creatively and express themselves – moving their learning on into new areas.

Conclusion

Creative writing is a valuable tool for students. It is fun, and can stimulate their imagination. It utilizes both past experience and future ideas, and can aid in promoting artistic expression and self-growth. A student can gain a better idea of their own skills and talents from being given the chance to write creatively. Creative writing has a strong link to developing individuality and a sense of worth in oneself.

A lot of pre-taught structure can be woven into a creative assignment. This has the benefit of getting students to actively use what they have been taught, as one of the major issues within learning is not being able to process what you have learned, and forgetting input very quickly. Reinforcement does not necessarily have to be form-based, but can be present in more creative tasks that don't require repetitive grammatical exercises or excessive reading or writing comprehension.

Essentially, our life is one long story. It is the most important story for us. The opportunity to share our story with others is valuable, as we can learn what it is to be human, and also to learn about the successes and failures of the human story – our own story. When writing creatively we are not only taking control of our learning, but we are also connecting and sharing in the human quest for exploration and meaning. This is a vital part of the learner’s journey, and the human journey itself.

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About the authors: Simon Kenny is a lecturer at Saitama University. He has a deep interest in Asian religion and culture, and has carried out field studies in India, Pakistan, and Israel. He received his MA in Asian Religions from Lancaster University. Simon’s current research is on Japanese views of the spirit world.