

EXPERIMENTING WITH LANGUAGE THROUGH CREATIVE WRITING TASKS

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Abstract

This article reports a small-scale study that explores ways of using creative writing tasks to address learners' motivational and anxiety challenges in English writing. The study adopts an action research design (Burns, 2010) with cycles of reflection, planning, implementation, evaluative reflection, and analysis. The study was conducted for one semester with 41 students of low intermediate level of English proficiency participating in the research. The data was gathered through the researcher's classroom observation, learners' writing products, and lesson plan reflections and evaluations. The result of the study shows that 1) learners are able to produce personal and meaningful short creative texts; 2) creative writing tasks encourage learners to be a self-directed and autonomous English learner; 3) creative writing tasks allow learners to experiment with their current vocabulary knowledge and produce linguistic creativity; and 4) creative writing tasks expand their lexeme and senses knowledge.

Keywords: teaching methodology, L2 writing, creative writing task, action research

INTRODUCTION: INITIAL REFLECTION

Writing has often been considered as the most difficult and, therefore, less favorable subject for most of my students. Learners come to the classroom with this attitude and discouraging mindset that, often, is very difficult to change. It is quite common to find learners who are reluctant to write from the very beginning of the course. It is also a common sight to witness some students gradually stop coming to class towards the end of the course.

In my previous teaching context, the component of writing skill is introduced in 5 levels (Writing 1: Writing paragraphs, Writing 2: narrative writing, Writing 3: argumentative writing, Writing 4: Academic writing,

Writing 5: Report and research writing). From the very first day learners joined the introduction level of writing course, writing is introduced to the learners in a form of constructing sentences with explicit explanations of grammatical construction. Later, the lesson would gradually expand to constructing a paragraph and a text with heavy emphasis on regular pattern, structure, and format. Learners are required to produce a certain type of text with the teacher as their audience. They are very often conditioned to keep up with the teachers' demands and corrections. Writing becomes impersonal for the learners since everything is being overly dictated and controlled for them. This makes learners think that their opinion is not worthy at all. Learners might feel that they are incapable of voicing their own ideas.

The teaching of writing most of the time focuses on form and products. The overt attention to language structures often frustrates the learners. This strict attention to 'form' tends to divert learners' attention from writing up their ideas to the importance of having correct grammatically written text. Learners also begin to think that what matters in a written text is to produce correct grammatical sentences. Hence, writing is more of a product of grammatical reinforcement learning than learning to communicate in written form.

The conventional writing classrooms in this context also rarely pay attention to the learners' readiness to learn and practice writing in English. Teachers assign the kind of text they want them to write and leave the learners to find their own way of getting ideas to write. Pre-writing activities are rarely introduced to the learners. This problem may only worsen the learners' negative attitude towards writing since they do not know how to start writing and end up not writing anything at all.

From the problems described above, learners have often made to feel that writing may not be their needs but the teacher's. I conclude that these problems have often become the cause of learners' negative attitude to writing courses. In the effort of breaking this negative attitude, I have thought of introducing the use of creative writing tasks as a way of establishing learners' confidence in writing in the hope that learners would view writing as a way of communicating. This paper, therefore, aims to describe that creative writing tasks offer learners a journey of 'self' exploration, creative linguistic experimentation, and learner's development in learning to voice their view points and ideas (constructing personalized meanings).

WHY CREATIVE WRITING?

When I proposed this idea of using creative writing tasks to several writing teachers, most teachers would argue that asking L2 learners to

produce a creative writing piece would be too linguistically and cognitively demanding. “How would you expect them to write a piece of creative writing when they don’t even know the correct grammatical patterns? They’re not creative writers!” From these responses, I quickly learned that these teachers view creative writing as referring to the Great Classic Work of written piece by (and compared their learners to) great authors like Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Charles Dickens, and other great authors that they are exposed to and/or imposed to in their past learning experiences. I therefore turned to Maley’s categorization of the teaching of literature.

Maley (2012) categorizes several approaches to the use of literature in language teaching programs:

- 1) Literature as study (teaching *about* literature): This perspective centers upon the teaching about literature (usually canonical texts are being studied as the objects of the study). This kind of approach is very dominant in any English Department (even in pre-service teacher education program) in Indonesia.
- 2) Literature as resource (teaching *with* literature)
- 3) Literature as appropriation (*learning through literature*).

Due to the rich potential that Maley’s describe on the use of literature, I adopted the second and third approaches in teaching writing.

In responding to the issue of creativity, I refer to Boden’s (2004) view of creativity. She makes a distinction between, what she termed with, ‘Psychological’ creativity (P-creativity) and ‘Historical’ creativity (H-creativity). Boden explains that Psychological creativity “involves coming up with a surprising, valuable idea that’s new to the person who comes up with it” (2004, p. 2)

In a very broad sense, creative writing may be defined as a kind of writing which involves imagination and creativity. Often, this type of writing is associated with producing literary composition - such as poems, fictions, and a drama script - and personal writings - such as journal or personal diaries, memoirs, and autobiography (Harmer, 2001; Stegner, 2002; Gorman, 1979, in Lihua 2006). In L2 context, Hyland (2003, p. 8) states that this type of writing encourages learners to be able to express themselves and to find their own voices in producing writing that is fresh and spontaneous. The classroom usually uses the students’ personal experience and opinions in producing a piece of writing. It is a creative act of self-discovery. In other words, writing is a personal act of exploration.

Maley (2012) provides reasons for using creative writing in the language classroom:

- Creative writing aids language development at all levels: grammar, vocabulary, phonology, and discourse;

- Creative writing fosters ‘playfulness’ (language play). It encourages learners to play creatively with the language;
- This playfulness encourages learners to take risks with the language, explore, experimenting, and manipulating the language;
- Creative writing promotes balanced use of the learner’s right and left side of the brain;
- Creative writing develops self-confidence and self-esteem which leads to an increase in motivation;
- Creative writing feeds into more creative reading: by getting inside the process of creating the text, learners come to intuitively understand how such texts work, and this make them easier to read for the learners.
- Creative writing helps to improve expository writing: by helping learners to develop their own individual voice, it makes their writing more genuinely expressive (2012, p. 2-3).

Creative writing, as Maley puts it, is “aesthetically motivated. ... It is a personal activity, involving feeling” (p. 2). He further emphasizes that creative writing significant quality is the way it can evoke sensations. Based on this nature of creative writing, I believe that writing needs to start from personal writing. What I meant by personal writing here is to write about or using their own past and present experiences, wonderings, questions, emotions, and opinions. It is hoped that learners are able to firstly learn to voice their opinion through personal writing. It is for this reason that I proposed the creative writing to be integrated in the syllabus of the institution’s curriculum.

THE CREATIVE WRITING WORKSHOP COURSE (THE PLANNING STAGE)

The creative writing workshop was proposed to the institution as the preliminary writing course to build learners’ interest in writing and reduce their negative attitude towards writing. The institution, finally, accepted this proposal. The creative writing workshop course was offered to the first year learners. The specific goals of the creative writing course were to enable learners: 1) to understand the process involved in producing a text; 2) to understand various text types and genres; 3) to understand and utilize various language styles of expressing their ideas, values, and opinion in their writing; 4) to develop and utilize their creativity in producing a written text; and 5) to develop learning autonomy and positive attitude towards writing.

The course focused on the process of writing in which learners were guided with several steps or directions which make use of their background

knowledge and experiences as the source of ideas for their writing. The learners were also introduced to the idea of planning, drafting, editing, and revising their writing. Almost in each meeting, there was an allocated time for learners to do peer-feedback.

In this course, different types of literary text such as poems, short story, autobiography, and play script are introduced to the learners. The poem writing activity involved several types of poem such as writing diamond poem, senses poem, haiku, mini saga, and poems using stems. From this short composition, I moved to longer composition by introducing them to writing a short story text. Learners are asked to write a short story of about 500 words. Then, the learners are introduced to writing up a short memoir and finally to short play-script. Journal writing was also introduced to the learners as one of the way to practice their personal writing and reflective ability and to record their ideas.

THE IMPLEMENTATION AND RESULT

Through the course, I observed learners learning behavior and found several benefits of creative writing for the development of learners' language and their thinking skills. I started the course with introducing the learners to poem writing. I thought that poem writing was probably a good start since the length was usually not too long. Poem also allows learners to write in chunks of words which might be less threatening for the learners to start writing.

Experimenting with language

I started with asking learners to write a noun phrase poem, in which they were asked to think of the smallest aspects of the noun that they were referring to. I provided simple examples of a noun phrase poem and invited learners to produce their own noun phrase poem. During this task, the learners showed effort of experimenting with new vocabulary. I was teaching the noun phrase in the class and looking for a way of checking the learners' comprehension and assigned them to write a noun phrase poem as their homework. The task was very simple, that was to make 5 lines of noun phrases which are still related with the noun that they put as the title of the poem. The learners responded positively and write simple noun phrases poems such as:

Hometown

My beloved hometown
 On the slope of Mount Merbabu
 Green tress like an unbroken carpet
 The fresh air we breath every time
 A healthy body we will have
 (By Sutriyono)

House

Habitation for human
 Place to take a rest
 Enjoyable place
 Keep from bad weather
 Peaceful
 (By Femmilia K)

The poems above show that learners began to understand the construction of a noun phrase. There is the head noun and modifiers for the head word. Through this activity learners also practice their word association of the concept they chose to describe.

One advanced student came up with a more elaborative poem of the noun phrase as follows:

My any many money moo

Who doesn't know money??
 Baby, adult, old, know money.
 We all need money.
 Even the dead needs money
 Money is not everything
 But...
 Everything needs money
 (By Nana M.)

Imagine a monkey
 Singing in karaoke
 Holding a glass of lemon tea
 (by Tatiana AS)

Imagine a komodo
 Wearing a kimono
 Chasing Pak Harto
 (by Tatiana AS)

In the poem 'money', it can be seen that the learner is playing with the sounds (phonological aspect) and the form of words (morphological aspect) to make the title rhyme just as the children nursery rhyme does. Instead of making a group of noun phrases, she writes in complete sentences. Yet, her poem contains a sense of 'playfulness' with careful arrangement of meaningful idea. The clever part of the poem is how she turns the view point of one classic value, often conveyed by parents to their children: "money is not everything", and voices her own opinion of the matter at the end of the poem in a playful manner.

Another poem writing activity that allows learner to experiment with the language is the stem poem that I learned from the Creative Writing Group. The stem is to follow this form:

Line 1: Imagine (an animal)

Line 2:(an activity that the animal is doing)

Line 3:(an activity that the animal is doing)

Note: the last word of every line has to rhyme (have to have similar sound)

This poem reinforced learners' knowledge about gerund and also vocabulary. Learners are encouraged to think of words that have similar sounds ending and arrange the sentences in order. The short length of the poem may be less threatening for the learners to start writing. But, from my observation, what encouraged them the most to write the poem are the examples that the teacher gives. I witnessed how they felt challenged by the simple and playful nature of the examples. The learners produced more than just one poem and showed their work to other students. They write to be shown to their peers. This adds a sense of audience to their writing. Learners also did not realize the grammar points that I was trying to teach to them. Yet, they manage to produce it well with additional benefits of vocabulary and pronunciation learning.

Expressing personal emotions through guided creative writing tasks

Another advantage of creative writing that I found in the learners' writing is that learners are encouraged to express their emotions. In their journal, learners would prefer to write short poems than their personal comments about what they felt in the form of narrative paragraphs. Poem is probably more preferred by the learners because of its length. Learners do not have to write in long sentences but only with some chosen words that they think could represent what they want to say. Most of their writings talk about their troubles, loneliness, wonderings, shame, regrets, and isolation.

Blue

Blue...
Sun is blue
Trees is blue
Blue in everywhere

Alone...

Strange smile
Strange place
The sad place

Behind the mask
Nobody wanna be my friend
I just see tears
(By Dana Sari)

A place where I belong

When I think of a place where I belong
I feel deeply sad inside of me

Me...

Am I yours?

You...

Are you the one?

Should you know

That I'll always be yours?

If you're not mine...

Should I convince myself

You're created for me?

I saw something falling to the ground...

It broke into pieces...

Should I realize it was my heart???

(by Daniel Nugroho)

Tired

Tired is suck! Suck! Suck!

I see something bad through my eyes
I smell stinking people around me
I taste a worst live without purpose in this
place (By Irva FK)

Me

Here I am in an empty space
Stand in the middle of my sadness
I look down to the ground
Hoping for an angel
Who will pick me up from my lonesome?
(By Tirza Y)

Tired is not being able to think clearly
Tired is not being able to concentrate
Tired is brain and other organs not
cooperating
Tired is when everything does not goes
well
Tired is an ugly face.
Tired is headache
Tired is no more energy
Tired needs to rest
Tired is what I feel right now.
(by Tatiana AS)

I also noticed that the learners are more expressive in their journal writing than in their classroom work. This is probably due to the time constraint of the lesson in the classroom and the presence of authority of the classroom (the teacher) that hinder learners' freedom to express their feelings. In writing up their journal, they have more time to think of what to write and a time alone to write. I began to see that writing become a therapeutic tool for the learners. Several learners even talked about their addiction problem in their journals:

My bottle looks at me
Why are you staring at me?
Is anything wrong?
Why do we stay close together?
Is something happen?
My bottle why do you mute?
Or maybe you have talked
And maybe I'm deaf
Nobody knows
This time only you and I, going our ways
I'm tired of lies and all these games
I don't care if it hurts
I only want to be with you,
...my bottle
(by Alexander)

When I think of cigarette
I feel I can't breath at all
I see small white pencil
I smell fog from the rubbish burning
I taste sweet candy outside but bitter papaya's
leaf inside.
(by no name)

Cigarette

Mild, delicious
Flying, addicting, fogging
Harmful
(by Yoakhim)

Cigarette

Accompany me in every
situation
Suck it...
I'm enjoying
Blow the smoke to the clear air
I'm happy
So slowly shatter my health
Day by day
Take my soul little by little
Take my path into DISASTER!
(by Jedidiah)

Reading their poems I could finally see that their reflective ability becomes sharpened. The learners seem to realize that their drinking and smoking habits are addictive and harmful for themselves. Yet, these students could explain the reasons for having these habits in a very simple and vivid way. These poems may seem like ‘a cry for help’ statement.

Since their reflective ability is sharpened, learners begin to have confidence in expressing their opinion in their poems. They voice their views, values, and wisdoms quite bluntly in their poems:

The opposite

What is difficult for the lazy,
Easy for the diligent.
What is impossible for the pessimist,
A challenge for the creative.
(By Yohanes R)

Wisdom is like stone
Silence but solid
A quiet person is like stone
Full of knowledge but no bullshit.
(by Benny P)

Life

Some say life is too short
And some say life is too long
When I am bored
I say my life is too long
When I know the day of my last breath
I say my life is too short
I am too stupid
I talk too many nonsense
For those who understand the meaning of
life
They will be grateful for what they got
Since they know what is the best for them
(By Sulistyono)

Tick-tock the clock
From right to left
Which follows which?
The long one or
The short one?
It doesn't matter
When the time speaks
To end everything.
(By Harris T)

Everybody hates it
Nobody wants it
But they must face it
They should learn more, more and
more...
Although it's hard to realize
And it's not easy like turning the
palm of your hand
Because there's only one winner
So...
Don't be a loser!
(by Robert CS)

The poem ‘the opposite’ talks about the author’s observation of what is happening around him. The author voices his philosophical value as the result of his observation. Similar with ‘the opposite’ poem, the ‘tick-tock the clock’ poem describes the author’s observation and visualization of time, from the description of a real object (the clock) to a more abstract concept of time. Yet the poem manages to capture the uncompromising nature of time.

The poem 'life' reflects learner's evaluation on what he has seen and has done. The author seems to have a conversation with his inner-self. Through these poems I witnessed that the learners slowly reveals their little voices in printed words.

Learners' experiences as a source of inspiration

Learners very often complained about not having any ideas to write about. Therefore, I designed an activity that could stimulate their past experiences as a resource. Through creative writing, learners develop creative ways of explaining something that they like or dislike using their own experiences. When assigned to write poems in different ways (senses poem, diamond poem, and haiku), learners came up with topics that are very close to their context and environment. What is even more interesting to see is that their playfulness in comparing one thing with another:

My scooter

When I think of my scooter
I feel back into the rock and roll time
I see a beautiful fat bottom of a strange girl
I smell a tender jasmine gasoline
I heard a sweet harmony of worst drum
(by Ariyanto K)

Morphology

When I think of morphology...
I feel a ton of rock on my head.
I see a lot of stars in my eyes.
I smell burned plastics.
I taste a bitterness of black coffee.
And I hear the buzz of a thousand bees.
(by Sri Rejeki)

Weather

Unpredictable, changeable
Confusing, disturbing,
destroying
I can't hold it
Women
(by Irva Febri K)

Noodle

Tasty and spicy
Twisting, dangling and fulfilling
It shakes my tongue
Indomie [a brand of noodle]
(by Jeddidah PJ)

My Jeans jacket

My worst jeans jacket
It is unfashionable
My mother hate it
(by Ariyanto K)

The 'scooter' poem manages to describe the author's liking by comparing each part related to the scooter with other real objects that can easily be visualized. Another learner talks about her dislike of the Morphology course that she has to take that semester by comparing it with other matters that annoy her. Another interesting poem is the diamond poem about weather in which the ending is a bit unexpected to me. In a diamond poem, the last line is usually filled with a word that is an equivalent for the

word in the first line. When I read the title I was predicting the last line might concern with other natural phenomena such as lightning, thunder, or typhoon. I was not expecting the learner to consider women as the equivalent for the characteristics of the weather. This shows that this learner had understood the concept of metaphor and was able to manipulate this form in the diamond poem assigned.

Creative writing reflects learners' reading experience

Another interesting point that I found in learners' writing is the relationship between reading and writing. I came across to several writings that reflect learners' readings:

Hero

Strong, smart
Charming, helping, flying.
Protect the earth
Superman
(By Indra YP)

Spiderman

Strong, brave
Crawling, jumping, climbing
Making peace in the world
Hero
(By Lucky S)

Desperate

Harry Potter...
Can you help me?
Lend me your magical-map
Lend me your magic robe
So that I know
Where she goes tonight?
What does she do tonight?
Give me *vitaserum*
Teach me curse of *imperius*
So that...
She tell me the truth
For what purpose she did it everyday
Help me Harry Potter
(By Panji)

Most of the students in my class like to read comics and song lyrics. There are several writings that are inspired from the comics that they have read. The poem 'hero' and 'spiderman' describes the characteristics of the superhero they know. What is more interesting is the poem 'desperate' which is heavily influenced by the novel *Harry Potter*. The author has applied the concept of allusion in his poem. From these poems, I conclude that creative writing needs creative reading. Reading other creative composition provides learners model or examples for their creative writing. As Maley (2006:34) states that learners' previous reading helped them in writing by associating the texts they have read, seeing connections between them and comparing one with another.

From poem to narrative writing

After the learners seem to be comfortable enough writing poems, I moved a bit further by asking them to extend their writing into a narrative text. In this stage, I ask the learners to write their regrets and then explain these regrets in a piece of a narrative text. I found learners are finally able to write simple and short narrative text (see appendix 1). The poem helps learners to concentrate and think back of what they have or have not done in the past. Learners may find problems with the language. Hence, the length of the narrative text they have to produce should not be too long (250 words max). From here on, the learners are guided to write longer short story (500 words max). Group discussion is also encouraged in helping learners look for ideas to write or even revise their friend's work.

From spoken discourse to written discourse

The next type of text introduced to the learners is the play-script. Learners were also enthusiastic to produce this kind of text. The first thing I do to help them understand this type of text is by asking them to record a conversation among themselves and to transcribe the tape. Their transcript then is being compared to script-play. They were asked to find similarities and differences. Then, they are asked to complete their transcript with other missing characteristics of a play script. They are especially motivated when asked to write short script to be performed by their group. Hence, learners write with an audience and a purpose in mind.

CLOSING

The most difficult problem that I had to face is the number of students. The class consists of 41 students with beginning intermediate level English proficiency. This made it difficult for me to give immediate feedback. Most of the time, I asked them to do peer-editing equipped with several guiding questions to help learners to edit their peer work. Yet, I still think that a more specific guiding instruction is still needed for the peer-editing session. One way of handling a big-class is probably through collaborative learning. However, which kind of collaborative learning tasks could provide constructive feedback for the learners may still need to be explored.

Despite the difficulties I found in conducting the workshop, I witnessed some positive learning behavior that the learners showed. I have seen learners who are shy and reluctant to speak in the classroom are actually the ones who are expressive in conveying their thoughts, point of view, and feelings in their work. I also witnessed the joy of sharing and

appreciating other students work. Learners also tend to be very talkative in their writing although their grammar sometimes got in their way of conveying their opinions and feelings. Another positive learning behavior that I found in this creative writing workshop is their courage and confidence to state their voice on some issues in their real life. They managed to connect their writing skills to write what they experienced in their real life. They managed to find a sense of purpose in writing. These phenomena made me believe that creative writing can really do encourage learners to write.

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Appendix: From poem to narrative writing

The poem:

I regret acting so cold in front of you
I regret to think of you as empty chair
I regret I'm lying to myself
I regret I don't see you
I regret for being so shy
I regret I never talk to you
I regret I never greet you
But my most painful regret is the moment when you left me and I could only look at you from far distance.
(By Panji S.)

The Memoir:

Graduation (by Panji S)

That day is my graduation. I was happy but also feel said when I remember it.

"Yeah, finally I graduate now. But I must be separated with my beloved friends. What are you thinking about, stupid? The time is running out. You must depart now" I said to myself.

So I went to school. There, all of my friends were complete. It's seems that the ceremony had not started yet. Quickly, I joined them.

However, there was a girl who was the one I avoided. I didn't know why, because I did not hate her. I did not feel comfortable if she was there. Actually, I fell in love with her. However, I didn't have any courage to tell my feelings to her. I was afraid that my friends laughing me if they knew about it. So, to hide my feeling, I acted that there was nothing between us. Even, I often ignored her. For me, she is just an empty chair. I almost never smile. But, I wanted to speak to her.

Fortunately, the ceremony was begun. There was a dilemma in my heart. I want to tell my feeling, but I didn't have any courage to do that. From the beginning of the event until the end of the event, I only looked at her. I never spoke to her. However, she sat beside me. And I still didn't have any courage to tell my feeling. I just stared her when she left, without any words. I seem OK, but actually I felt so disappointed. Even until now. I will not let this happen again.