

Creative Writing in English as a Foreign Language : the Issue of Learner Autonomy

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外国語としての英語のクリエイティブ・ライティング：
学習者自主性の問題

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Abstract :

This paper looks at creative writing as a means to embrace and promote learner autonomy in EFL teaching. Creative writing has been considered as an effective form of self-expression in many fields, even therapeutic for psychiatric patients and prison inmates. However, despite its huge potential as an empowering tool, its application in an EFL setting has seen little attention. Although motivating learners to write genuinely original essays and reports is important, it remains a huge challenge for many teachers. Since the majority of EFL curricula fundamentally focus on academic writing, creative writing-oriented learners feel left out. This study will look at learners' attitude towards creative writing and how its introduction in the classroom can revitalise the learning process through learners' engagement and self-expression. My observation and the results of this study show that the majority of learners have a more positive attitude towards creative writing because it allows them the freedom to experiment with their new language and express their 'truer' selves in the process.

要旨：この論文は、EFL 授業での学習者自主性を受け入れ、促進する手段としてのクリエイティブ・ライティングを見る。クリエイティブ・ライティングは、多くの分野、精神病患者や服役者の治療としてさえ、有効な自己表現の形として見なされてきた。しかしながら、能力を与えるツールとしての大きな可能性にもかかわらず、EFL 環境でのその適用はほとんど注目されていない。学習者を、真にオリジナルのエッセイおよび報告書を書くように動機付けることは重要であるが、それは多くの教師にとって未だ大きな課題である。大多数の EFL カリキュラムは、基本的に学術ライティングに重きを置いているので、クリエイティブ・ライティング志向の学習者は疎外されたと感じる。この研究は、学習者のクリエイティブ・ライティングに対する態度、およびその教室での導入がどのように学習者の従事と自己表現を通して、学習過程を活性化するかが見られるだろう。私の観察とこの研究の結果は、学習者に彼らの新しい言語での経験と、学習過程での「より真実の」自己を表現する自由を与えるので、大多数の学習者はクリエイティブ・ライティングに対するより前向きな姿勢を持つことを示す。

Key words : creative writing, academic writing, learner autonomy, English as a foreign language

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Introduction

The question of whether to include creative writing (CW) in EFL classroom curricula is a recent one. The dominant view in EFL teaching has been that a foreign language should be ‘taught’ in a highly structured manner ; and learners’ proficiency should be vigorously and consistently tested at every level. This approach to language teaching seems at odds with CW, as the latter inherently focuses on individual expression, while the former emphasises standards. In recent years, however, there seems to be a shift among some teachers who are willing to accept the importance of CW alongside the structured academic writing in higher education.

There are several reasons for this shift. First, lack of motivation among writing students, which is partly attributed to the shortening of the attention span among ‘digital natives’ (Prensky, 2001 cited in Holthouse, 2013, p.88) and partly due to learners feeling disconnected from what they write in an academic writing course (Azizi, 2014), has led some EFL teachers to take notice of the attractions of other freer forms of writing. Second, the shift may also be due to the break from the traditionally industrial view of education, in which learners’ individuality was not an educator’s concern, instead, the goal of producing identical graduates with more or less identical sets of skills and abilities were of more importance. However, it is now widely accepted that learners are individuals with differing learning abilities and interests. Even intelligence, the yardstick with which learners have been measured, is no longer considered as simple as one thought, but rather multiple (Gardner, 1983). Third, the L2 teaching approach has been steadily converging with the L1 teaching approach. Since most L1 learners are exposed to literature and CW alongside academic writing, the trend in L2 teaching has been to do more or less the same, arguing that a holistic approach to L2 teaching is fairer and more effective.

Despite the shift in thinking, for the majority of teachers incorporating and implementing CW into the EFL writing curriculum remains an option that is easily overlooked. This is surprising given how prominent the extensive reading programmes have become in the EFL field, where most of the reading materials available are fiction, therefore it makes perfect sense to introduce CW as an avenue for learners’ output.

CW has often been the subject of confusion. For some, writing in any form, be it an academic research paper or a short story is a creative endeavour ; therefore adding the word ‘creative’ is unnecessary. Others, however, argue that CW only refers to manipulating the language in a way that is new and aesthetically pleasing for an audience. The lack of distinction among all forms of writing in the former takes away the aesthetic one usually associates with CW as something pleasing and entertaining, while the latter puts the bar far too high even for L1 speakers, let alone L2 learners. For our purpose, CW refers to something in between the two extremes with the focus on creating short narratives, such as new or personal stories that are fictionalised and told in more interesting ways. This also applies to short poems, such as non-restrictive haikus, diaries of their daily activities and observations, and scripts for short plays and films, which learners create to express their feelings or opinions or both. It provides students with a venue for self expression as well as a channel for their output in response to what they read in English, either for their extensive reading courses or for pleasure. It is imperative that learners are given such an opportunity and autonomy to write what *they* want, not only what the teacher demands.

Autonomy in learning refers to students taking responsibility for their learning (Little, 1991). Since CW gives learners the freedom to write what they like, it allows them the space to take responsibility and initiative for their own learning. Students often forget their independence upon entering a classroom and give control to the teacher to dictate *what* and *how* they are taught. This may seem convenient for some teachers as well as learners ; however, it is often the case that as soon as students leave the classroom they think or reflect none or very little on what or how they learned. This is because they are not asked to express their true selves in their writings ; instead they are taught how to follow a specific set of rules to compose an essay or report. CW, on the other hand, shifts the focus from the teacher dictating the content and process of learning to learners making decisions for themselves. This shift allows learners to reflect on themselves, their past experiences, the people around them, and even imagine new things. This process heightens their self-awareness and self-reflection, and reminds them of their autonomous being, inside as well as outside the classroom. Pintrich (2000) argues that self-reflectivity and awareness of one's own being as a free subject within an educational context aids better learning.

CW also provides learners with the chance to put their acquired language to creative uses, i.e. producing texts that could be enjoyed by others ; therefore giving a voice and platform through which they can express themselves as thoughtful and caring individuals. In addition, CW allows students to see their target language less as 'foreign' and inaccessible, but rather as a tool they can experiment with and even change, which gives them a deeper language experience and builds their confidence and self-esteem (Maley, 2009). Lack of motivation among EFL writing students stems from their lack of confidence as well as their detachment from the process and content of their learning. This can be remedied by giving them more autonomy through CW.

Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) argues that autonomy helps intrinsic motivation among learners. Intrinsic motivation, according to Pink (2009), relies on three components ; autonomy (for our purpose, the freedom to write what learners want) ; mastery (the desire to improve their skills and enjoy the process) ; and purpose (that extends beyond the course and classroom, i.e. authentic written pieces for a genuine audience). Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, such as pass or failure in tests and exams as the carrot and stick, takes away the joy of learning. The effect of learner autonomy on motivation was also supported by a study by Noels, Clement and Pelletier (1999) in which they examined the relationship between learners' motivation and their perception of their teacher's teaching method. Learners with higher intrinsic motivation thought of their teacher as less controlling while learners with lower motivation perceived their teacher as more controlling. This suggests that empowering learners creates a more autonomous learning environment, in which students and their teacher are participants. This allows more authentic and genuine interactions in the classroom than what results from formalised teaching and assessment. In the participatory approach, each learner is seen as an autonomous individual whose genuine thoughts and feelings are considered in how he or she is taught ; therefore, their self-expression harnesses their creativity and critical thinking.

Creative Writing in L2 : Obstacle or Opportunity?

Despite the optimism shown among some teachers, doubts remains as to what extent any genuine CW in L2 is possible. As Maley (2009) states, "[one] of the interesting facts to emerge was a wide-

spread belief among teachers of writing that CW had a positive effect on students' writing of expository texts and helped them develop that much-desired but rarely-delivered 'authentic' voice" (Paragraph 16). Linguists also agree that there is an evolutionary barrier or threshold facing adult learners of a second language, which is generally set around puberty (Hurford, 1991). Edward Vejda (2001) speculates that for tens of thousands of years humans lived in isolated communities of hunter-gatherers, therefore, the need to learn a second language was not important for their survival. Many L2 learners echo this view that they cannot fully be themselves in a language other than their native tongues. My students often remark that their expression in English appears less intelligent and even childish, which can hinder their creativity. Lack of knowledge and sufficient vocabulary to fully express their true selves in English make the creative writing process a huge challenge.

Despite these challenges, CW in a foreign language in general and English in particular may create many opportunities. It is widely accepted that creativity feeds from diversity. Having the experience of two sets of different linguistic and cultural communities puts L2 learners in a more advantageous position. This vantage point can enhance one's observational ability. Creative writers often remark that having a distance or detachment from their community allows them to be more creative. Burns (2013) looked at several studies and argued that detachment from the world surrounding creative people helps their creativity. Echoing this, Wallace (1986) concludes that creativity is a way of reconciling the conflict between detachment and commitment. Many of my own students with intermediate or advanced level of proficiency in English, have remarked that they feel in-between their native Japanese and English ; and go back and forth in the course of a normal day. This phenomenon of repeatedly moving between two linguistic communities is most apparent among returnees, students who have lived in a foreign country and returned to their native country, or those who have lived in more than one country for an extended period of time. Furthermore, a study on the effects of foreign language learning on creativity by Ghonsooly (2012) “. . . found that mastering a foreign language in a classroom context dramatically increases the four components of divergent thinking ability, i.e. fluency, elaboration, originality, and flexibility.” (p.164). This study shows how learning a foreign language can enhance creativity. Perhaps one of the reason those students show more creativity is that the process of learning a second or foreign language is closely tied to forming a new identity around that language that is different or separate from their identity in their native language. This identity formation in the new language in itself is a creative process, which should be enhanced through creative projects in the EFL classrooms.

Writing in a language other than one's mother tongue may also bring about a feeling of liberation. Often we are inhibited to freely express ourselves in our first language ; because partly we are conditioned by our upbringing and environment and partly the way we have (consciously or unconsciously) suppressed our thoughts and feelings, which make freedom of expression challenging. This conscious or unconscious self-censorship limits our creativity ; therefore, for many people a second language offers autonomy from those constraints. Samuel Beckett is a good example. He wrote some of his plays in French and then translated them into English, simply because he found it easier to express himself in French, a second language to him. He wrote : “More and more my language [English] appears to me like a veil, which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things. . . lying behind it.” (Becket, 1929–40) Another example is the Korean writer Mia Yum, who likens writing in her second language, English, to “putting on a new dress” and being someone else (cited in

Savignon, 2002, p.14). Another important benefit for English learners is the opportunity to reach a wider and more global audience, which may not be possible in their native language.

Methodology

Participants

Ninety ($n = 90$) students (female = 59, male = 31) of International Studies majors at a private university in Japan answered our survey questions. Their TOEIC scores ranged from 430 to 820. All the participants were taught to write academic essays and research papers. Creative writing was not part of the curriculum ; it was left to each teacher. Most of the participants, however, did non-assessed creative writing as an extra-curricular activity. They were free to choose what they wanted to write. Some wrote play scripts in groups and performed at the end of the semester. Some wrote individual short stories and compiled them into the class anthology. Others wrote poems or lyrics as part of their extra-curricular project. Overall, the majority of the participants took part in one form of creative writing projects and their works were read and commented on by their classmates and the teacher, but none of them was given marks, so their creative work did not count towards their final grades.

Survey results

Table 1 The percentage of reading fiction and non-fiction, and creative and academic writing in English

Answer	Reading fiction	Creative writing	Reading non-fiction	Academic writing
0-25%	13	37	15	3
25-50%	23	27	40	31
	36	64	55	34
50-75%	43	21	29	29
75-100%	11	5	6	27
	54	29	35	56

The survey results showed that there was a clear disparity between what students chose to read and what they are taught to write (Table 1). For their extensive reading class as well as for pleasure students clearly had choices to make, and as we can see the majority of them (54 out of 90) answered that over 50% of what they read in English was fiction. But less than a third of them (36) said that the majority of what they wrote was in creative writing. This same pattern was repeated when they were asked about their reading and writing of non-fiction, which included academic writing. 35 out of the 90 students answered that most of their reading was non-fiction, while 56 of them said that they mostly did academic writing in their writing classes. These results indicate that creative writing appears to be a more logical activity for students who mostly read fiction, which is generally – but not exclusively – accepted as a creative writing endeavour. A study by Ito (2011) found that there was a clear correlation between reading and writing. Tavares (2008) also argues that there is a strong connection between what students read and what they write. Further studies (Carson et al., 1990 ; Hirose & Sasaki, 1994 ; Jones & Tetroe, 1987 ; Pennington & So, 1993 ; Raimes, 1985) have confirmed the correlation between the two skills. Most professional writers and novelists advise would-be writers to read in their genre in order to learn the necessary techniques that can help them in their own writing. As the above data shows, most of the students chose to read fiction, therefore, in order to enhance their experience of learning English and raise their motivation level it is vital that they should also be taught to write creatively alongside their formal academic writing.

Table 2 Preference on reading and writing type (# of students from n = 90)

Answer	Reading	Writing	Reading classmates' writing
Creative pieces (short stories, poems, scripts for plays etc.)	65	57	67
Academic pieces (essays, research paper, formal letters, newspaper articles etc.)	25	33	23

As we can see in Table 2, an overwhelming majority of the respondents preferred reading fiction (75%) as well writing creative pieces (63%). I have often observed an unwillingness or lack of enthusiasm when I ask students to edit or review their classmates' essays. However, when they read creative pieces written by peers, students seemed more interested in the task, and as a result they offered more genuine feedback. As our survey suggests, most of our participants (74%) preferred to read creative pieces written by their classmates, while only 26% of them favoured academic pieces.

Table 3 Self-expression

Answer	Can express myself better	Okay to make mistakes
Creative pieces (short stories, poems, scripts for plays etc.)	49	71
Academic pieces (essays, research paper, formal letters, newspaper articles etc.)	41	19

Learner autonomy is often promoted for two principal goals : to increase learner motivation and to encourage more genuine participation and self-expression. Table 3 shows that the number of students who believed they could express themselves better through creative writing was slightly higher (54%) than those who believed academic writing allowed them more freedom of expression (46%). This shows that it is important to take learners' views and interests into consideration in designing a curriculum that best supports learners of different interests and goals, those who are academic-oriented and those who are creative-oriented. One of the important aspects of self-expression is daring to make mistakes. Those learners who think it is acceptable to make mistakes have a greater chance of developing genuine participation and authentic voices in their writing. Here, 71 students (79%) thought making mistakes in creative writing was tolerable, but only 19 students (21%) said it was acceptable in academic writing. This may suggest that learners approach academic writing methodically, which can teach them a sense of perfectionism. This will be useful for their future academic studies as well as in their careers. Learning a language, however, needs to have an element of raw and uncensored self-expression, where making mistakes should be encouraged rather than avoided at any cost.

Table 4 Self-reflection

Q. Which of these statements would best describe you? (You may choose more than one.)	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
S1. I like the freedom to create new things.	39	18
S2. I like following rules to achieve something.	36	17
S3. I like to express how I feel and think.	53	24
S4. I like to be told exactly what to do.	24	11
S5. I like to use my imagination when I write.	32	15
S6. I like questions which has only one answer.	8	4
S7. I don't like thinking too much.	25	12

Table 4 shows a variety of opinions about how participants perceived themselves. The Table 4 statements do not represent academic writing or creative writing in their strictest forms, but they do highlight the way learners see themselves and whether the students are geared towards one or the other or both. This part of the survey was an attempt to find out the students' attitudes towards their own personalities. Creative writing is often characterised by the freedom (S1) it offers to the learner to use their imagination (S5) to express themselves (S3). The students who selected those three statements comprised 57% of responses. Preference for non-creative activities where strict rules (S2) apply, the outcome is often pre-determined (S4), and there is often only one answer (S6) comprised only 33% of the total responses given by the students. This does not definitively show that students are against academic writing per se, but it shows their willingness to use their creativity and imagination in English.

Table 5 A selection of representative students' quotes

Academic writing	Creative writing
It's stressful to follow every rule . . . I felt that there was no "myself" in these essays. I like expressing my opinions but in academic writing you always have to care about why or how you come up with ideas, thoughts and opinions.	I think we are required to be creative in our real life ; . . . we can tell our story to our family or friends in more interesting and exciting way by being more creative. We should be creative to be accepted by people around us as an interesting and positive person.
Once we get out of our classes and go into practical situations such as business meeting or studying abroad, the ability of academic writing is . . . indispensable.	Creative writing is one of the fun things to do in class. No pressure, no rules . . . and also it's very interesting to read other people's creative writing!
Academic writing is difficult for me to write because there are many things to think before writing, such as thesis statement, a nice hook and so on. Academic writing skills helped me a lot when I was in university abroad.	I think creative writing has a lot more freedom than academic writing. You don't have to think about what you should write about or what kind of writing should be. There is no good or bad in [creative] writing like drawing a picture or doing calligraphy.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to understand the learners' attitudes to the use of creative writing in the EFL classroom at a university level. Since the responses are overwhelmingly positive in relation to CW, EFL curricula should reflect that. Learner motivation is often tied with the lack of autonomy and the level of respect given to them. Ronke (2005) uses CW to recruit more students into the German programme as the number of entrants has declined over the past years. He writes : "Throughout my years of teaching, I have found that the best means of recruitment is to offer classes that involve creative, (inter-)active, and hands-on activities that provide relevant and rewarding learning experiences in a positive personal environment" (p.280). This seems to be the trend as more and more teachers are eager to incorporate what learners want. A top-down approach to education where the teacher decides what the learners should learn in the 21st Century certainly seems outdated and inefficient. Through CW, language learning becomes an individual and non-conforming endeavour and learners are considered "individual human beings who will have private and public lives that transcend whatever disciplines they associate themselves within college" (Tate, 1993, p.321).

Some of my students have remarked that they did not remember what they wrote in their essays during the previous semester. This disconnect with what they write in their academic writing class is also echoed by Morgan (1994) who writes on non-creative writing : "Pupils have said to me

again and again how bad they feel that so little of their thinking appears in what they write in the foreign language” (p.45). CW brings an element of personal authenticity to the experience of learning a foreign language in otherwise artificial situations. Morgan further argues that “[the] personal aspect of creative writing is particularly valuable in foreign language learning since much of what is learnt is transferred language from artificial situations” (ibid).

The rationale for academic writing to prepare students who pursue further education or at least for the sake of survival during their university years is justified, but beyond that it seems superfluous to solely focus on it. Academic writing also can be justified by the fact that it can easily be assessed. And most teachers are better equipped to teach and evaluate academic writing, while very few have the confidence to teach and evaluate creative writing. However, assessment should not be the goal of education. Instead of meticulous evaluations, it would make a better teaching and learning experience if teachers engaged with their students by talking and listening to them, as Paul Hullah, a literature-based EFL specialist, argued in an interview with Bibby (2012) this way is “realer and more reliable” communication than TOEFL or TOEIC scores (p.33). Ultimately learners’ learning abilities and knowledge are hard to quantify with a few sets of questions at the end of the semester. They have more individualised abilities that could be expressed in a more liberating and creative environment, rather than through examinations.

Some argue that most EFL teachers do not have the expertise or necessary qualifications to teach CW. In CW teaching, however, teachers can participate in the process themselves in order to build rapport and students’ confidence. This makes the teacher a more genuine member of the class, on par with the students, not an outsider. As Maley (2009) writes, “There is little point in exhorting learners to engage in CW unless we do so too. The power of the teacher as a model, and as co-writer is inestimable” (paragraph 12). Dervishaj (2009) echoes this view: “In using drama in the classroom, I have tried to act as a facilitator rather than an authority or the source of knowledge” (p.55). In some cultures teachers are considered as an all-knowing source of knowledge, not just as a facilitator on an equal term with the students. Taking part in the process of creative writing with the learners can have a positive impact in bridging such gap.

It is also better for students to experience a foreign language as a whole: the creative and academic aspects. For future career development and further education, academic writing may have great relevance. Creative writing, however, enables students to have the flexibility to express their ‘truer selves’ and engage in a more complete way, as they become familiar with the figurative expressions in English as well as literal ones. This also builds their confidence by instilling a certain feeling of ownership of a second language by engaging with it in a more creative way. Birdsell (2011) writes: “. . . [Many] teachers express . . . that often learners of a foreign language sound unnatural because they speak or write in an “over-literal” way lacking the opportunity to be exposed to these metaphorical structures” (p.887). In addition to making L2 learners better users of the language, there is also evidence that CW can actually enhance their academic writing. A study by Bell and Conboy (2008) found that creative writing in fact aided formal essay writing skills as it allowed students to develop their own authentic voice, write more expressively and increase their fluency.

Conclusion

Learning a language is a process of self-creation and self-assertion. In other words in the process

and as a result of learning a language one announces their existence within a linguistic community. This, therefore, is a creative process in itself. Providing learners with the opportunity to express their 'truer' selves through creative writing enhances their experience and makes learning more interesting and autonomous. As this study suggests most students have a more positive attitude towards creative writing than academic writing. It is important to engage students in the process of learning in order to increase their motivation. Some learners find the artificiality of what they are taught in formal writing less and less appealing. Writing creatively in English brings a personal element to the process, which in turn allows learners to develop their creative skills in constructing a more authentic voice in their newly-acquired language. This also helps them to reflect on themselves and those around them, which could boost their confidence in themselves as well as making them more responsible learners. However, further research is necessary to see their attitude after they are taught creative writing and their works are assessed. One might speculate that once students are required to do something, it may become a chore.

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