Creative writing in ELT: Organically grown stories

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Many EFL/ESL students do not experience the benefits of practicing creative writing in English, which include expanding knowledge of literature, and using classroom language skills, learning new language structures and vocabulary. Students are motivated to learn English by engaging in creative writing exercises in English language teaching classes. Despite not having the luxury of a creative writing course, it is possible to include such a component in various ESL classes. Following a short discussion of the nature of creative writing and an overview of the relevant research, this article outlines one method of having students produce stories that grow in scaffolded stages, from concept, to words, to lines, then to story. Students report the process to be interesting and non-threatening, and report gains of confidence through sharing their stories.

多くのEFL/ESLの学生は英語による物語作りの便益を経験していない。その便益とは、文学の知識が広がること、言語スキルを活用すること、新たな言語の構造や語彙を学習することである。本論文では、概念から始まり、言葉、数行、物語へと段階的に発展する物語を学生がつくる方法の一つについての概要を示す。学生はこのプロセスを興味深く、無理のないものであると思い、物語りを共有する楽しみをもつことになる。

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

Introduction

In his article, "Creative Writing for Students and Teachers" Maley (2012) asks a question many of us have been asking for years, "Why is it that most institutional systems of education develop such narrow and unadventurous teaching procedures?" (para.1). It is rare to find creative writing (CW) in ELT, even in small doses. He goes on to state that a lack of imaginative language teaching often leads students to "develop a lifelong aversion to the language" (para. 1). Like Maley, more and more ELT educators are calling for an increased use of CW in ELT. Having students write stories in English gives them more insight into the art of fiction, gives them an opportunity to use the language skills they possess, and encourages them to explore vocabulary and grammar that they might not consider otherwise. As Smith (2013) points out in his experience of teaching CW in ELT, "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," (p.15).

In addition, students writing stories to be shared tend to use natural language forms and to develop a more natural, albeit EFL, voice. Having students produce writing that has come from their feelings and ideas gives them self-confidence, allowing them to mature as writers and English speakers: "Self esteem along with confidence in the language, grows as students are encouraged to break out of the text-book style of learning by repetition" (Rowlands, 2012, para. 6). Students are very happy to take a break from textbooks and formal writing, and explore personal reflection and creative endeavor. Thus the benefits of creative writing are many, including vocabulary building (Ying, 2008), and engaging in language

play to "express uniquely personal meanings" (Maley, 2009, para. 3).

In her review of Writing Poems and Writing Stories (Maley & Mukundan, 2011), Lima (2013) outlines the recent trend to include CW in ELT (see also Frank & Rinvolucri, 2007; Wright and Hill, 2008). Indeed, creative writing is taking a more prominent position in ELT, with schools offering full semester EFL/ESL courses in creative writing.1 CW is also shown to transfer learned skills to academic writing, increasing writers' competence and confidence. In an ESL CW program at a large mid-western university in the U.S., "all of the students felt that their academic writing had improved" (Ostrow and Chang, 2012, p.48).

Different from the academic prose English language students usually write in their university classes, creative writing more overtly attempts to aesthetically engage both the reader, as well as the writer. Although some educators may be resistant to including creative writing in language classes, there has been a "revival" of CW (Maley, 2012, p.561), with many educators understanding that "creativity is a fundamental aspect of education and should be promoted accordingly" (Stillar, 2013, citing Engle, 1999, p. 165). While many educators demonstrate the value of CW in ELT (Franz, 2005, p.17; Keplinger, 2001), more and more educators (Apple, 2004; Holthouse and Marlowe, 2013; Sano, 2004) simply choose to presuppose the value of CW in ELT, eschewing the process of initially defending the use of CW, and directly address techniques.

Creative writing is often thought of as hair-wrenching 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 pre-taught 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.

With their associative words, students immediately constructed lines, with most students writing directly on the computer. They wrote quickly and easily, as if they already had conceived the lines, even as they were asked to write. This took approximately ten to fifteen minutes, depending on the length of the primary word of each student. One student, having spoken about her interest in fashion, wrote on that topic:

Fashion
I like **f**ashion.
Armani is a famous men's brand.
I have never taken a **s**nap.
I often wear **h**igh heels because it makes my legs slimmer.
Fashion shows my **i**ndividuality.
Ortega design is popular in winter.
When I was a junior high school student, I wanted to be a **n**ail artist.

Marcus (2011) and others use similar techniques of writing lines from pre-selected words, seemingly chosen at random; however, I find the exercise works especially well when the words are not just plucked out of the air, but have a deeper meaning for the students, having arisen from their personal interest.

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 non-fiction, and she proudly read it to a group she was assigned to.

Writing a story

From this map/outline, students wrote their stories. Here is a resultant story from a student of lower-intermediate English ability, apparently an apple pie aficionado:

Apple Pie

Long, long ago in a certain place, there was a small village. The villagers lived in poverty. One day, a boy named Jack was walking around in the woods near the village. He searched for food. His family was hungry and was waiting for him to come back. There were just the trees and the leaves. He got tired because he was walking around all day. He leaned against the soft grass. After a while, he fell asleep from exhaustion.

He heard a loud cry. He stood up and saw the birds pecking at an apple with their beaks. He takes a good look at the looks of it.

"Help me!" the apple was crying.

Jack ran up to the apple's tree. He pelted the birds with lumpy stones and brandished a long branch. The birds flew away.

"Thank you" the apple said. "I want to return a favor."

"I'm hungry." Jack said.

Then the apple fell into his hands. It was

damaged.

"Eat me!" The apple said.

"Is that a good idea? But my family is also hungry." Jack said.

"How about making an apple pie?" The apple said.

"Sounds good! What shall I do?" Jack said.

"Look!" The apple said.

Jack suddenly noticed that there was a small house behind the apple tree. He opened a door. A bright light escaped from its interior.

Jack awoke from a dream. He smelled apple pie and looked round. There was fresh-baked an apple pie. He took it home and ate with his family. It was great apple pie!

The final step in the CW process was to flesh out their stories with sensory details and dialogue, as assigned homework. In the class, students had read, discussed, and written about O Henry's "Gift of the Magi," in Draper (2006), and Alfred Uhry's, *Driving Miss Daisy*, in McCloskey and Stack (1993, p.87). In the exercises, the students were instructed on the importance of sensory detail and the form of dialogue. Aside from a general tendency to clump their sensory details together and to put all the dialogue in one place, students handily completed the assignments. In the final class in this CW process, students read their stories aloud, and subsequently reported that they enjoyed this CW exercise. As Wood (2011) points out, using narratives from the personal ethos of the student is an effective way "to create an engaging, productive classroom experience" (p.239). In Lima's review , she emphasizes that encountering CW in non-threatening way in language classes provides "a much more enjoyable, personalized, and productive learning experience" (p.147). Using this type of process as a bridge between the student and the literature made the textbook more understandable, and made the words flow easily throughout the entire writing process. Integrating the reading of literature, connecting it to the student on a personal level, then

having students write pieces influenced by the literary forms they have read has been described as a "staged model of the creative process" (Burton, 2010, p. 500). Through these pieces, students explored poetry, myth, sensory detail, story, character and dialogue. At the same time, they enjoyed writing poetry, prose and drama. As Maley (2012) points out, the benefits to CW in ELT are numerous, and CW could be a valuable component within any ELT program.

Selected internet sources for creative writing exercises

Creative writing for EFL/ESL: many websites have exercises for creative writing, usually targeted at younger students. However, many of these exercises also work very well with adult students. Here is a short list of selected web sources.

<bogglesworldesl.com/creativewriting.htm>
<eslpartyland.com/creative-writing-esl-student>
<examiner.com/article/the-stories-of-our-lives-esl-writing-tips-for-the-new-year>
<busyteacher.org/classroom_activities-writing/esl-creative-writing-prompts-worksheets/>
<eslsite.com/resources/pages/Resources_and_Teaching_Ideas/Writing/index.html>
<eslcafe.com/idea/index.cgi?Writing>
<squidoo.com/eslstorywriting>

Endnote

1. CW at Monticello Trails Middle School, Kansas, meets every other day for an entire semester. (<www.usd232.org/education/components/scrapbook/default.php?sectiondetailid=35321&>)

Acknowledgments

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Author's Bio

Clay Bussinger, teaching English since 1982, holds a MA in Teaching Writing from Cal State Humboldt. He is interested in literature, writing, and task-based teaching.

Recent papers in ELT, Linguistics, Phonetics and Creative Writing. Papers. People. Exploring cross-language transfer of metaphorical skills with bilingual Spanish/Catalan EFL learners: A case study. This case study aims to describe the development and findings of a research project designed to explore whether the phenomenon of cross-language transfer, regularly conceptualized in terms of the Linguistic Interdependence and Linguistic more. Besides the above areas of ELT some papers deal with professional proficiency and effective communication skills which are essential tools for success in job interviews.

Contents. Preface List of Contributors. 1. Teaching ESL through CALL S. Zahira Banu. 2. Teaching English in Rural Areas Using Flash Cards B. Zulaiha. Creative writing is one of the most enjoyable types of writing for students. Not only does it allow students to explore their imaginations, but it helps them to structure their ideas and produce writing that they can be proud of. However As a result, you need to spend some time focusing on the core elements of storytelling. Focus instruction time on teaching Our story. The best thing about writing ELT materials for primary is the opportunity we get to write stories. While discussing our experiences as authors and our contributions to common projects, we discovered a shared passion for story writing. Further discussions revealed that while we shared some approaches to story writing, there were lots of things that we did differently and we could learn a lot from each other. 'Too ELT' relates more to story language, especially dialogue, which doesn't feel natural to a native speaker, as well as perhaps tired themes which have become too commonplace in primary ELT courses in general. One editor mentioned that too many exclamation marks were unwelcome!