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Introduction

MAKING A CASE FOR CREATIVE WRITING IN ACADEMIC ENGLISH PROGRAMS

A PARABLE OF THE CREATIVE CHILD

There once came onto this earth a child with a great love for life and a passion to create. One early summer day, she closed her eyes and cupped her small hands together; she hoped, prayed, and asked for a caterpillar to appear . . . and when she opened her eyes and unfolded her fingers, a caterpillar wiggled on the tender skin in the palm of her hand. And the child smiled. She cupped her hands together again and closed her eyes; she hoped, prayed, and imagined a butterfly in her hands. When she released each finger, there—waltzing against the air with its iridescent indigo wings—sat her butterfly. The child’s eyes danced, welcoming this new life and creation. Then the child smiled again and winked a wink of winks—and the butterfly understood. Within moments, the two were flying above and below the clouds, above and below the trees on that early summer day. Yes, there once was a child who came onto this earth.

To you, the reader, who now holds this book in your hands or views it on your screen, I would like you to consider the possibility that you are the creative child in the parable. You have the passion, the power, the magic, and the love inside your heart and mind to make life beautiful—for you, your students, and the world. You have the opportunity to revolutionize English language learning by introducing more creative writing to your students and helping them to become better thinkers, writers, and observers of the simple yet profound and meaningful moments of their lives.

THE CASE FOR CREATIVE WRITING— A DISCUSSION IN FOUR ARGUMENTS

So, why creative writing? What does it offer and what can it accomplish that academic and technical writing cannot? What is so special about it, and why should English language programs across the globe be promoting it as an essential skill like reading, grammar, speaking, and listening?

The answers to these questions may appear somewhat controversial; they call into question the status quo and suggest that English language programs should not focus solely on academic and technical writing, at least not in the basic, intermediate, and low advanced writing courses. To show, then, what creative writing has to offer, let us take a look at four arguments to shed light on why it ought to have a special place in the English language curriculum.

Creative Writing Uses the Students’ Personhood as the Source for Writing Material

Academic and technical writing require English learners (ELs) to write about various topics specific to the course they are taking or related to the topics generated in their textbooks (Randolph, 2012). These are most often interesting topics, like the pros and cons of performance-enhancing drugs, immigration reform, or new policies in education. The topics, however, have little to do with the majority of the students’ personal backgrounds or interests. One major issue that my own students have experienced is that while studying at basic or intermediate levels, they are asked to

write about concepts that are very foreign to what they know. There is often no real connection between the material and who they are as individuals. In addition, the students are asked to write about the topics in their nonnative language. This merely complicates matters, causing frustration and a fear of academic writing (Randolph, 2012; Urbanski, 2006).

Creative writing, by contrast, focuses on and uses the language learners' personhood as the source for the writing material. Whether it is poetry or prose, students tap directly into what they know based on their personal histories, memories, feelings, and experiences to think and write about their topics. This can be a direct connection to a personal experience, like recalling the smells in their grandma's kitchen, or it can be an indirect but meaningful connection in which students use their imagination, like writing about being a cat in a small Turkish village. The stories are always generated from what makes the students' personhood. The creative writing experience is consequently very personal and gives the ELs a sense of ownership in both the process and the product. The writer's golden rule of "write about what you know and are interested in" is at the core of creative writing.

Creative Writing Promotes Flexibility in Skill and Thought

Academic and technical writing, although very important and useful, are frequently contrived, template driven, forced, limiting, and highly formulaic (Randolph, 2012). In terms of developing strong writing skills and training the mind to be flexible and insightful, it seems that these kinds of writing often do the exact opposite. Nash (2004), a professor in the College of Education and Social Services at the University of Vermont with more than 40 years of teaching experience, summarizes different kinds of academic writings as "a matter of understanding how to fit some new pieces of the knowledge puzzle into the old research templates; a matter, if you will, of knowing how to pour new research wine into the same old format bottles" (pp. 54–55).

Zinsser (2001) rightly claims, "You learn to write by writing. It's a truism, but what makes it a truism is that it's true" (p. 49). For our ELs, however, I would add creative writing to the mix: You learn to write by practicing creative writing. To promote growth in thought and development in the writing process and to help students become more flexible in how and what they write, there is no better tool than creative writing. This is why English language programs need to consider revolutionizing their outdated and rather ineffective ways and incorporating creative writing-based activities and methods into their basic through low-advanced writing curricula (Fanselow, 2014; Hecq, 2015; Immordino-Yang, 2016).

There is no template for creative writing. That said, one could argue that some poetry is limited to certain patterns and structures (e.g., "breath poems," tanka, or sonnets) or that there is a basic structure for short stories that requires a story arc and character development. The content, however, that ELs work with is still generated from their memories, experiences, and observations. The impact of this content is supported by Eagleman's (2015) research in neuroscience. He shows that "the meaning of something to you is all about your webs of associations, based on the whole history of your life experiences" (p. 33).

The fact that creative writing has multiple genres also gives ELs an opportunity to work on many kinds of writing and writing skills. Within the basic genres of poetry,

prose, dialogue, and creative nonfiction, there are a myriad of styles, forms, and skills that can help ELs broaden their understanding of what writing is all about while simultaneously making them better writers.

For example, writing “breath poems” teaches ELs the difference between using weak and strong lexical items; creating short stories enhances the ELs’ understanding of detail in descriptions and explanations; developing dialogue helps in creating an authentic tone; and creative nonfiction blends creativity with facts, allowing students to craft a solid sense of accuracy in the details and establish believable content. And ultimately, the more ELs do creative writing, the more they write and learn about themselves, their topics, and their skills.

Research in neuroscience (Eagleman, 2011; Jensen, 2008; Medina, 2009; Ratey, 2002; Sousa, 2011; Willis, 2006) consistently points to the need for the brain to be flexible and to look at reality from multiple perspectives if it is to continue to acquire new skills and learn various kinds of information. Granted, this can be done with different types of academic writing, but only after the students have developed their skills at a high enough level. Because creative writing pushes students of all levels to think in unique ways, it is an extremely effective medium to help foster their critical thinking as well as develop their various skills in the writing process.

Creative Writing Works with Emotions and the Tangible World

Another argument for using creative writing is that it is very natural for the cognitive processes to incorporate emotions while learning skills and information.

Yes, rational thought and logical reasoning do exist, although hardly ever truly devoid of emotion, but they cannot be recruited appropriately and usefully in the real world without emotion. Emotions help to direct our reasoning into the sector of knowledge that is relevant to the current situation or problem. (Immordino-Yang, 2016, p. 37)

To ask basic to low advanced ELs to analyze recent theories in quantum physics or executive policies at the state level of government, critique Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*, or summarize and respond to alternative methods of transportation is vastly different from having them choose emotionally heightened events in their lives and write a reflective essay, poem, or piece of flash fiction about them. The difference is simple—the former writing topics are very abstract in nature while the latter are based on emotions and are concrete and tangible.

Having students write about abstract ideas or concepts that they have not emotionally embraced or experienced is indeed setting many students up to fail. “People don’t come preassembled, but are glued together by life” (LeDoux, 2003, p. 3). These life experiences are encoded, stored, and even recalled by the power of our emotions, which “are central to the functions of the brain and to the life of the mind” (Davidson & Begley, 2013, p. xi). It is only logical, then, that we help our students become solid writers by using a medium that is based in the concrete world and filled with helpful learning devices like emotions. In fact, over the past 24 years, my students who have done creative writing have often mentioned that this type of writing fills them with a sense of emotion that other kinds of writing don’t. There is an element of joy inherent in producing these types of writings—a topic with which I will conclude my arguments for using creative writing.

Creative Writing Is Fun!

“Argumentative writing is new to me, I’m learning a lot from it! Although my favorite is still creative writing . . .”

—A former student

At the beginning of each semester, I ask my students to consider doing one thing that will add meaning to both the class and their lives, and that is, “Make writing your friend and learn to walk hand in hand with her.” I explain that they don’t necessarily have to pledge their heart to her, but if they can, I urge my students to befriend her and have fun with her presence. And, if they do, life will be ever so sweet.

In Plato’s *Republic*¹ (trans. Sterling & Scott, 537a), Socrates makes a claim about education that all writing teachers ought to embrace. In Book VII of this influential work, the dialogue centers around the finer points of how the youth should be taught, and the argument is made that “we must make learning fun.” Writing can be a burden, a chore, a difficult and daunting task. It can, however, also be great fun, enjoyable, and something that inspires our students to learn about a vast number of topics and develop as writers themselves. Creative writing is the catalyst for this positive adventure by making learning fun, which in turn makes the act of writing fun (Randolph, 2014).

Csikszentmihalyi (2013) has studied the phenomenon of creativity and the human condition for decades. In his book, *Creativity: The Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, he highlights the essence of what inspires creative individuals. What he has found is that

[c]reative persons differ from one another in a variety of ways, but in one respect they are unanimous: They all love what they do. It is not the hope of achieving fame or making money that drives them; rather, it is the opportunity to do the work that they enjoy doing. (p. 107)

When the coeditors of this book and the contributors of the many wonderful activities teach creative writing, we notice that our students truly enjoy developing characters and plots that are born out of their own ideas and experiences. They like sharing these in written form because they are genuinely connected to the creative process and the work itself. The end result of all of this is “they all love what they do” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013, p. 107).

Perhaps one of the most amazing realities of creative writing is that students from across all disciplines can do it, and they can do it very well. Not all biology majors want to write about concepts or issues in civil engineering, and not all civil engineering students can necessarily write comfortably or confidently about topics in biology. But, students in both biology and civil engineering and students from all other disciplines can write meaningful poetry and engaging short stories. Creative writing is an activity that all can do and all can enjoy. And this is why we should incorporate more of it in our English language classrooms.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have claimed that academic and technical writing, although very important, are limited in nature (Nash, 2004; Randolph, 2012). True, they are essential, but they ought

1. This is a brilliant example of philosophical creative writing.

not to comprise the entire foundation of English language instruction (Fanselow, 2014). Creative writing, on the other hand, teaches ELs at all levels through relying on their own personal resources to develop a strong sense of confidence, control, and comfort in their writing skills. Through the medium of creative writing, ELs learn to express their ideas in a natural way and organize their thoughts to create a genuine feeling or situation in a poem, fable, dialogue, or piece of short fiction.

The activities in this book will help ELs from all levels embrace a love and appreciation for writing. There are 97 activities that will help learners develop their use and knowledge of vocabulary and sentence structure and will nurture their overall craft of writing with a sense of intrigue, comfort, and confidence.

At the beginning of this introduction, I asked you to consider or imagine yourself to be the inspirational child in the parable—that child with a “great love for life and a passion to create.” I want you to entertain such an idea and think about how you can help shake the dust off of our writing departments and help make writing classes more beneficial and inspirational for our students. Through using the various concepts in creative writing, I hope everyone can find the magic of creativity and develop the joy of writing about the unique moments and wonders of their lives.

Patrick T. Randolph

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

As coeditors, we are honored to offer *New Ways in Teaching with Creative Writing*, the first book of its kind, to the English learning community.

The book is organized in four parts:

- I. Poetry Activities
- II. Prose Activities
- III. Dialogue Activities
- IV. Creative Writing Projects

All activities state the proficiency level that is suggested for the students, the aims of the activity, the estimated time needed in class, the estimated time needed by the teacher for preparation, and the resources needed. Each activity provides an introduction with some background information, followed by step-by-step instructions to lead students in the activity. Many activities include a caveats and options section and a list of cited references or suggested further reading.

The materials and resources available to each educator vary; however, for the sake of simplicity, the activities in this book assume that all teachers have access to a blackboard or whiteboard, paper, and writing utensils. Thus, those materials are not listed as resources.



When you see this icon, go to www.tesol.org/CreativeWriting to access and download appendices, worksheets, and other activity resources.

Also online, you can find a handy list of “Terms to Know” if you have questions about certain terms or concepts related to creative writing. This list covers basic ideas, such as *plot* and *poetry*, as well as more uncommon terminology, such as *acrostic dialogue* and *tanka*.

This edition of the *New Ways* series is unique in that each of the 97 activities offers sample work at the end of each activity. We included these to help you visualize and understand the product or result of each activity. Some of these were written by the contributors themselves and some by their students.

The activities for each of the four sections are arranged according to their levels, from those suitable for all levels of language learners to those most appropriate for advanced learners:

- All
- Low beginner
- Beginner
- High beginner
- Low intermediate
- Intermediate
- High intermediate
- Advanced

We recommend that the novice instructor follow this order when using the activities. The seasoned instructor, however, can easily adapt a beginner level activity and turn it into an advanced level activity and vice versa.

Please enjoy the book and have fun!

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