Writing creatively in a foreign language

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This paper argues that there is both room and benefit to having creative writing instruction included in an EFL student's education. The rationale behind promoting a creative approach as well as a description of the implementation of a creative writing syllabus will be detailed. The syllabus detailed is structured around the classic five elements of story-telling: setting/atmosphere, conflict, character, plot, and theme. Different units of the course will be explained, as will assignments and exercises from each unit. Writing teachers can adopt this syllabus in its entirety, or simply choose from the exercises presented in order to creatively supplement their traditional composition courses.

この記事は、EFL学生の教育には想像力に富んだライティングの指示をすることに可能性と利点の両方があると主張しています。ライティングの授業項目を導入する方法とそれを昇進する背後にある理由が詳しく述べられるでしょう。授業項目は、物語を語るうえでの伝統的な5つの要素で構造化されています。それらは　背景・環境、難問、登場人物の性格、あらすじ、および主題です。それぞれの授業項目には、課題や演習が説明されています。教師は、この授業計画を全体的に使用するか、もしくは与えられた課題を選び、その授業内容に部分的に取り入れて使用することができます。

WITH REGARD to learning English as a foreign language, standard academic composition instruction is beneficial for many language learners, and a necessity for students who intend to someday study at a Western university or participate in research in accordance with Western academic writing standards. The majority of writing textbooks and course curricula intended for EFL students reflect this. However, in teaching these Western standards and expectations, it is not an uncommon experience for composition instructors to encounter widespread resistance—ranging from implicit apathy to explicit contempt—that is not found in language classes which address other skills. Rightly or wrongly, many students feel learning to write academically is not congruent with their career interests or instrumental in their overall language development. This dim view of academic writing in general is manifested in the typical apprehension and dread students often express when engaging in academic writing tasks. The Western-style academic writing skills a teacher seeks to impart can be very difficult to acquire and, while these skills are beneficial in advancing organized expression as well as high-lighting different rhetorical discourse expectations between Asian and Western contexts, they often appear impractical to the career goals of many students.

Student antipathy to standard composition instruction is one condition among many worth taking into account when designing a syllabus for a writing course (Kroll, 2001), but is nonetheless often forgotten due to optimistic expectations of student proficiency as well as established conservatism among seasoned composition program coordinators. That said, if coordinators and teachers are given broad leeway in course design, then other approaches could be considered, approaches which would ideally complement standard academic composition instruction. Among these might be a creative approach.

Before elaborating on the reasons for adopting a creative approach, a brief delineation of the differences between standard academic composition instruction and a creative approach might be beneficial. Bartholomae's article, "Inventing the University" (1985) very clearly explains the intensity of the need for conventional Western-style academic composition instruction:

> The students have to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and they have to do this as though they were easily and comfortably one with their audience, as though they were members of the academy… they have to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language, finding compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline. They must learn to speak our language. Or they must dare to speak it, or carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will certainly be required long before the skill is "learned." (p. 273)

This demand that students be fluent participants in a specialized discourse unique to Western academia is indeed legitimate and urgent, but largely for those seeking entry into the Western academic world. Nevertheless, this intense urgency shapes much of the ESL/EFLcomposition textbook publishing industry as well as the priorities of many professionals employed in non-Western academic institutions. As Zamel (1995) writes, students are often exposed to a composition approach that "focuses on grammar, decontextualized language skills, and surface features of language." This insistence on adherence to Western academic values can limit writing instruction to two basic philosophies, as explained by Fulkerson (1979): the formalist philosophy which focuses on correct grammar, syntax, and adherence to the principles best demonstrated by the five-paragraph theme; and the rhetorical philosophy which focuses on argumentation structure and organization, synthesis of outside research sources, and the effectiveness of a piece of writing with relation to its readers.

A creative approach, on the other hand, need not abandon formalist or rhetorical considerations, or even ignore the existence of Western academia; it simply chooses not to focus exclusively on them. Instead, successful writing is that which best articulates a sensation, provokes a sensation within a reader, or most effectively conveys an incident or story. This can be done through expressivist writing, poetry, scene-building or story-telling.

This paper argues that there is both room and benefit to having creative writing instruction included in an EFL student's education. Additionally, the rationale behind promoting a creative approach as well as a description of the implementation of a creative writing syllabus will be detailed. Different units of the course will be explained, as will assignments and exercises from each unit. Writing teachers allowed freedom of course design can adopt this syllabus in its entirety, or simply choose from the exercises presented in order to creatively supplement their traditional composition courses.

Rationale
The following are four reasons it might be beneficial to students for EFL writing instructors or program coordinators to consider adopting a more creative approach within a writing classroom:

1. The pressures associated with the formalist approach often adopted in standard academic writing classes can create tension that is counter-productive to language learning. Students in classes with strict formalist expectations often focus less on coherent organization and the communicative efficacy of their writing, and instead concern themselves more with making their document objectively "error-free." Often, this quest for surface perfection can distract the writer from the overall purpose of the paper, with student focus shifting away from refining the thesis and supporting it to issues of mechanics and grammar. For EFL students, the quest for formalist perfection generally reaches a stupefying dead end, typically occurring when the demand for sentence complexity vastly outpaces the student's grammatical or syntactical ability, and holistic revision, regardless of necessity, is perceived as counter-productive in light of all the grammatical work that has been achieved. Student time and attention then often turns to other surface issues, such as divining the number of spaces necessary for the indentation of a paragraph, worrying about the correct corner of a paper to write one's name, mastering the vagaries of double-spacing, and so on. By focusing inordinately on issues such as these, writing in English becomes less of a language activity and more of an art form, possibly causing academic writing to appear detached from the realities of everyday English communication.

2. Students with a strong creative drive would likely generate more enthusiasm when challenged with writing assignments that demand their creativity. If a student is prone to extraordinary and original ideas, being forced to, for instance, repeatedly and objectively summarize the writings of others might spur an eschewal of the use of written English as a potential medium for future expression. Conversely, if a creative student were presented with a number of methods for creative written expression, English writing could possibly become a preferred medium for self-expression.

3. Students, particularly Japanese students, without further academic ambition than graduating their current college will likely never again use many of the more complicated standard academic writing techniques (e.g. thesis statements, paragraph transitions, citation and integration of sources) taught in conventional writing courses. However, creative approaches to English writing could be useful in more common endeavors, such as international correspondence with friends or former host families, English journaling, and an appreciation of Western literature or entertainment that stimulates future reengagement.

4. Creativity is a distinguishing trait, one that is commonly welcome even in standard academic writing contexts. Developing creativity in writing can give students new ways to approach standard writing assignments and further set apart their essays from those of their colleagues.

Student characteristics

Although principles of creative writing could be used to augment almost any writing course for any group of students, the syllabus outlined in this paper reports on two classes taught for English majors at a Japanese women's college. The course was designed for students with an overall English proficiency of intermediate to advanced, and each student had enough previous English writing instruction to grasp simple paragraphing. Perhaps most importantly, the course was designed for students that are ready and eager to use their creativity, and have the bravery required to share writing with the instructor as well as with classmates.

Syllabus and course framework

The remainder of this paper reports on a creative writing course implemented in two successive autumn semesters at Kobe Kaisei Women's College. This course was taught (and probably would best be taught) as an elective. The class was designed around the standard Japanese university course model, which is to say a 90-minute class meeting once a week for a total of 15 classes. Ideally, this course would meet at least twice as frequently, but twice-weekly elective courses are often rare in Japan.

The progression of the course loosely followed the classic five elements of a story: setting and atmosphere, conflict, character, plot, and theme. Two to three weeks were spent on each element, depending on how much of "the process approach" (Kroll, 2001)—scheduling drafting workshops or peer editing sessions—was necessary. Each element featured a culminating creative essay which showcased principles discussed in class. The course was open to third- and fourth-year students, all of whom had taken basic academic writing courses in their first and second years.

Setting and atmosphere

This element is a key place for ESL creative writers to begin. Stern in *Making Shapely Fiction* demonstrates that something has to happen somewhere, and if "nowhere" is the place something happens, then nothing has really happened at all (1991). While most authors subordinate atmosphere as a part of setting, Burroway maintains the reverse, writing, "part of the atmosphere of a scene or story is its setting… the locale, period, weather, and time of day," while another "part of the atmosphere is its tone, an attitude taken by the narrative voice that can be described in terms of a quality—sinister, facetious, formal, solemn, wry" (2000, p. 169). Taken together, setting and atmosphere can be

thought of as a place, a time, and a general mood or tone. The exercises for this unit were designed to evoke this in writing, specifically through a focus on articulation of the five senses.

Exercises for this unit included:

- Sensation journal: a daily paragraph in which students reflected on the most striking physical sensation of the day, attempting to render it textually as fully as possible. One student wrote about the *sight* of spring's first butterfly, while another wrote on the *feeling* of warmth provided by the living room *kotatsu*.

- Famous film scene description: 2-3 paragraphs in which students described the setting and atmosphere of a favorite scene from a famous movie. One description detailed Rose's final goodbye to Jack in the film *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997), while another was about Luke Skywalker and Obi-wan's first meeting with Han Solo in *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977).

- A view from above: during one session, the Theme Writing class was abruptly taken to the university rooftop for a short writing exercise. Students had 20 minutes to compose a paragraph describing the day's surprise setting.

Conflict

First described in Greek literature as *agon*, or contest, conflict is the engine that propels any story. For the Theme Writing class, two major kinds of conflict were delineated—internal or external—followed by an explanation of the categorical manifestations contained within each (e.g. person vs. person, person vs. nature, person vs. society, person vs. himself/herself). Exercises for this unit were designed to sharpen student perception of conflict in stories as well as conflicts experienced in their daily lives.

Exercises for this unit included:

- Conflict journal: a daily paragraph in which students reflected on the most startling conflict they observed or possibly even participated in that day, attempting to render it textually as fully as possible. Memorable paragraphs were entitled, "My Mom vs. My Little Sister" and "Me vs. the Typhoon."

- YouTube movie trailer conflicts: students were shown multiple movie previews from YouTube, and then asked to identify the primary conflict or conflicts showcased therein. For a follow-up activity, students were given a YouTube conflict scavenger hunt in which they had to find English movie previews (or other video clips) which demonstrate the different kinds of conflict discussed in class.

- The world's most boring story: a good pre-conflict schema-setting warm-up activity in which students were asked to spend 15 or 20 minutes writing the most boring story imaginable. Enthusiastic students were asked to read their stories aloud. Invariably, the element missing (or highly subdued) in all of the most boring stories was conflict, and students seemed generally impressed to see this pointed out.

Character

In this terminology-intensive unit, students learned about different types of characterization that occurs in storytelling, and how compelling characters are most commonly depicted. Who is a protagonist and who is an antagonist? Whose point-of-view is the story told from? Is Character X two-dimensional in the sense that the audience is not given access to his thoughts, or is he instead three-dimensional? Is Character Y static in the sense that she does not change, or is her character dynamic throughout the story? Discussion time was also given to different characters' credibility—do we know and understand who this person is? Additionally, is it possible to relate to this character? Or, as Burroway phrases it, "almost any reader can identify with any character; what no reader can identify with is confusion" (2000, p. 98). Another factor discussed was each character's purpose, and how this invites and affects our judgment of her or him. Finally, complexity is a key element within any compelling character; when students were asked to list the most interesting characters from favorite books or films or even history, lists were widely populated with tremendously complicated individuals, such as a number of Hugh Grant's cinematic romantic comedy roles or the titular character from Ninomiya's (2005) manga, *Nodame Cantabile*.

Exercises for this unit included:

- Character journal: a daily paragraph in which students reflected on the most interesting person they encountered or observed that day. The goal for the paragraph was to textually render the person as fully as possible in order to demonstrate the writer's fascination. Memorable paragraphs were titled, "the old lady who works out at my gym," and "I don't understand my little brother."

- Character analysis from a film: a more in-depth essay in which students were required to present and describe a character from a film, using necessary character terminology while explaining why the film-character in question was compelling.

- From 2D to 3D, a reflection on someone you know: another in-depth essay in which students described someone they used to know only on a surface level, and how their perception of this person changed as they got to know him or her better.

Plot

In the nineteenth century, Freytag (1876), a German novel-ist and dramatist, conceptualized plot as a five-part pyramid: exposition, complication, crisis, falling action, and resolution. For the most part, Freytag's model accommodates the plot of every complete story. In this unit, students analyzed stories in accordance with Freytag's model, and learned to distinguish a story from a plot. This delineation is phrased most succinctly by Burroway: "a story is a series of events recorded in chronologi-cal order. A plot is a series of events deliberately arranged so as to reveal their dramatic, thematic, and emotional significance" (2000, p. 39). The realization that effective story-telling requires imaginative presentation more than interesting events often appeared startling for students, making this unit particularly memorable.

Exercises included:

- My most embarrassing moment: although the purpose of this essay is easily ascertained from its title, students were asked not only to relate the experience, but present the events with the detail and pacing necessary for an effective plot. Particularly shy students in Theme Writing appeared to warmly welcome my own personal example in which I described getting hopelessly lost and then losing my backpack during a disastrous visit to Tokyo Station.

- Seinfeld plot tracing: an episode of the American sitcom *Seinfeld* (Hauge, Rubin, & Cherones, 1994) was shown in class. This sitcom is ideal as each 22-minute episode contains multiple plot threads twisted together. Students were placed in groups, with each group responsible for the tracing of a plot thread, labeling each part of Freytag's model with the corresponding moment from the episode. The 22-minute episode was shown two times in class, with pauses at each commercial break in which students were given an opportunity to discuss with their team members.

Theme

The concluding unit of the class, theme, was also the most chal-lenging—both for the students trying to learn and for me trying to teach. Theme is often blithely defined as a story's lesson or moral. However, this explanation isn't wholly accurate as few stories are presented as morally clearly as "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" or "Tortoise and the Hare." Most often, stories don't have a unifying message or lesson that all readers from all cultures can easily agree upon. In the two times I taught this unit, I found myself transitioning from asking questions like "What lesson can you learn from this?" to "Where is the truth in this fiction?" or "How is the reality in this story similar to your own experience?" For instance, Miyazaki's (1988) animated film *Tonari no Totoro* is, on the surface, a whimsical fantasy in which young siblings befriend benevolent forest monsters, yet the film depicts the very real terror children often experience when a parent becomes seriously ill in ways that exceed a child's com-prehension. Perhaps the most important knowledge students gleaned from this unit was the notion that, by reflecting on a story and articulating its truth, the reader participates most inti-mately with the author, and thus, for authors, constructing their texts for maximum depth and intimacy is the highest creative calling.

Activities included:

- Short manga scene translation: in this brief essay, stu-dents photocopied a few pages from a favorite comic book, whited-out and then wrote translated dialogue in the appropriate dialogue bubbles and exposition boxes. Afterward, students wrote a paragraph explaining how these translated pages demonstrated an important theme

of the manga. One memorable translation was a selection of pages from Inoue's (2004) samurai-themed *Vagabond,* in which a young deaf boy is taunted by cruel children from his village. The boy then grows into a man incapable of fully connecting with or appreciating the humanity of others. Although Inoue doesn't explicitly state a theme, the student was able to relate the bullying depicted in the manga with the effects of bullying on classmates who grew up with her.

- The theme essay: for the culminating essay of this class, students used all five elements of story-writing to create a single story through which readers could negotiate a theme. Student feedback indicated they found this essay tremendously challenging, but most students regarded it as a rewarding experience overall.

Conclusion

A common cliché employed to describe the necessity of an essential thing goes like this: "the importance of X cannot be overstated." While standard Western-style academic writing instruction for ESL students is indeed important—undeniably essential for a great number of students—it might still be worthwhile for instructors and program directors to occasionally ask if its importance can indeed be overstated, particularly in certain contexts for certain populations of students. The academy as it's been cultivated in Western civilizations is a truly remarkable institution, and the rules which govern its discourse are worthy of study and often emulation.

That said, academic writing could also be effectively balanced with creative writing, and experience with both disciplines could have a significant impact in reducing student anxiety when approaching writing activities. Further, if a central goal in EFL is to improve a student's ability to communicate in written English, an exposure to multiple writing styles could conceivably yield results with a wider group of students. Creative writing assignments can be effectively structured around the five elements of story-telling, and, even if a student rarely writes again after leaving academia, the lessons learned in a creative writing class could still help enhance appreciation for literature and film. Finally, writing activities undertaken in a creative writing class might encourage some students to incorporate creative writing in their daily English learning activities, or possibly even guide them toward careers in creative fields.

Bio data

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