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Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

Creative writing and EFL motivation: A case study

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This is a continuing case study of an experimental creative writing seminar that is being offered to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at a university in Bangladesh by a visiting researcher from Japan. Questions being addressed are (1) do students perceive creative writing as motivational, (2) does creative writing encourage students to write in English outside of the classroom, and (3) does creative writing in English motivate EFL students to be better users of English? This is a report after two years of the three-year program.

この研究は日本在住外国人客員研究者がバンクラディッシュの大学でEFL学生(英語を外国語として学習する学生)に対して提供した実験的創作ライティングセミナーの継続的ケーススタディである。この研究は、以下3つの研究課題について検証を行った。1) 学生は英語創作ライティングをモチベーションの向上につながると考えているか。2) 英語創作ライティングコースはクラス外での英語でのライティングを促進するか。3) 英語の創作ライティングは EFL の学生が英語をより良く活用するためのモチベーションの向上になるのか。このレポートは3年間プログラムの二年目終了後の調査結果である。

The questions being addressed in this case study are: 1) do students perceive creative writing as motivational; 2) does creative writing encourage students to write in English outside of the classroom; and 3) does creative writing in English motivate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students to be better users of English? The answer to these questions, though answered in relation to this individual case study, of students at a university in Dhaka, Bangladesh, will have universal applications to other English programs, in other settings, in other countries. Creative writing in English is normally not considered the domain of the EFL or English as a Second Language (ESL) student, but rather as the prerogative of the native speaker. The case study will demonstrate that introducing creative writing to ESL

or EFL programs can serve as a powerful motivational force in the classroom, benefiting the students academically, emotionally, and linguistically.

Keller (1983, quoted in Dornyei, 2001b, p. 116) argued that motivation should be at the center of the education dynamic; yet, it was often neglected in academic discourse. Has that changed in the new millennium? According to Dornyei (2001a), it has not:

Teachers are supposed to teach the curriculum rather than motivate learners, and the fact that the former cannot happen without the latter is often ignored. For example, I am not aware of a single L2 teacher-training program worldwide in which the development of skills in motivating learners would be a key component of the curriculum. (p. 27)

This is unfortunate, as the discussion of second language learner (L2) motivation has some pedigree, and can be traced back to, among others, Lambert and Gardner, two Canadian social psychologists. In 1959 they began exploring the issues surrounding L2 learner motivation, using a social psychological approach. Their argument was that learning another language is unlike any other academic or educational goal in that it requires the individual to accept elements of an alien culture into the context of the student's life (Guilloteaux, 2007).

This research paper is one way that the authors have taken the challenge of examining motivation in the context of learning, and specifically in the context of L2 learning. It is hoped that Dornyei's assertion will cease to be valid as student motivation becomes a major topic in both the

literature on L2 learning and a component of L2 teacher-training programs. In reference to Lambert and Gardner (1959), the use of creative writing can allow the student to take the L2 and use it for his or her own purposes; i.e., to share his or her artistic and personal vision in the borrowed language, making it his or her own.

Bangladesh

As this case study deals with an experimental creative writing course taught in Bangladesh, a country off the tourist map and perhaps unfamiliar to many readers, the researchers judged it necessary to include a brief introduction to the country with pertinent geographical, social, and educational information.

Bangladesh as a cultural and political entity has existed for centuries in one format or another. However, its incorporation as the political entity that we know today as the People's Republic of Bangladesh came about after a short civil war that saw West and East Pakistan split and East Pakistan become Bangladesh in January, 1972 (Bangla2000, 2007).

Bangladesh has approximately 123.1 million citizens residing in a land area of 144,000 square kilometers (approximately 1/3 the landmass of Japan). It is bounded by India on the north, east, and west, and by Myanmar in the south, and rests on the Bay of Bengal. Its official language is Bangladeshi, or Bangla, but English is a required subject for elementary through high school students, and due to the existence of many English medium schools, at both the K-12 and university levels, English is widely understood. The

urban population is 23%, the literacy rate is 45.3%, and the per capita public expenditure on education is approximately 700 yen per year (Rahman, 2006).

The Bangladesh educational system is divided into four levels: primary, which goes from grades 1-5; secondary, which extends from grades 6-10; higher secondary, or college which incorporates grades 11 and 12; and university studies. There is a national, or public, education system, a private system in which English is often the medium of instruction, and a *madrasah* system that emphasizes an Arabic medium Islam focused sectarian educational curriculum (Bangla2000, 2007, and Bangladesh Ministry of Education, 2007). As of 2005, the student numbers in these divisions were as follows: primary, 16,225,658; secondary, 7,398,552; college, 1,367,246; university, 207,557; and *madrasah*, 34,453,221 (Bangladesh Ministry of Education, 2007).

Data collection

Two Internet-based surveys, three student focus groups, and a student memoir provided data for the study. Additional material was generated from a professional Writer's Focus Group, a presentation by a Bengali educator at AsiaTEFL 2006, and Bangladesh government websites.

The student focus groups from the 2006 class met within twenty-four hours of the last class and before the formal convocation ending the program for the academic year. Focus Group 1 had five members and Focus Group 2 had six members, comprising approximately 75% of the total class population. As with the Internet based survey, the focus

groups were given questions to inform multiple research objectives and also to identify areas of improvement for future courses. The 2007 focus group met within a month of the ending of the class and contained four members, all of whom had taken part in the 2006 and 2007 creative writing classes.

A Writers Focus Group was created during the second Creative Writing Class. There were three established Bengali writers invited, selected for their positions of influence, amount of time involved in creative writing, and their interest in promoting English language creative writing by Bengalis. The researcher relied on the advice of two Bengali university English professors to help make the selection. The focus group met one time in March 2007.

One of the 2006 students, a Master of Teaching English as a Second Language student at Presidency University, completed a memoir where she wrote about her experience in taking the creative writing class. Though originally not to be included in the process of this research, the instructor felt that this student's work, and her academic background in teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), made her remarks useful for this research task (Dougherty 2007b).

The host for the course was Presidency University, 11/A, Road 92, Gulshan-2, Dhaka-1212, and the class was held in a modern, air-conditioned room with a microphone and podium, adequate student seating, and access to power-point, multimedia, and a computer room stocked with Internet enabled, up-to-date computers and appropriate software. That said, power outages were a consistent problem (Dougherty 2007b).

The 2006 class met from March 2, 2006 to April 3, 2006. The class met four times per week over the four-week period, with each class lasting two hours. There were eighteen classes and a final examination. As preliminary inquiries indicated that most of the students had not had previous creative writing course experiences, the instructor decided to make the course a survey course that would include introduction to, and production in, four main genres: memoir, poetry, short story, and a drama section that focused on creating one-act plays and screenplays. The selection of these genres was based on the researchers' opinion that, in a month-long course, readings needed to be selected and writing assignments constructed so as not to overwhelm the students with work. Novels and novel writing, for example, was not dealt with because of these constraints. Additionally, the researchers had access to adequate examples, both modern and archaic, of each of the genres selected.

The second class of the Creative Writing in English program met from February 1st to March 4th, 2007. The 2007 curriculum focused on the short story and screen and theater writing. The decision was based on surveys of students given at the end of the first course where they were empowered to select genres that they would like to work with and write. As the survey showed an almost identical attraction by the students to short story and screen and theater writing, the decision was made to construct the second course around these two genres (Dougherty, 2007b). As with the first class, there were eighteen class meetings.

There were sixteen students in the 2006 class and twenty-two students in the 2007 class. In both groups the age ranges went from late teens to forties or fifties. In the 2006 class

there were four men and twelve women and in the 2007 class there were ten men and twelve women. Seven of the students in the 2007 group had taken the class in 2006.

A typical class

As mentioned, there were eighteen class meetings for both the 2006 and 2007 courses. Though each class meeting was different, they had some set elements.

Most classes began with one or two quotations, normally drawn from famous writers, and these were used to encourage discussion. Often the theme of the quotes would reflect the topic of the day, or the topic of a literary work that was being introduced.

Next a literary work would be introduced that was selected from the genre being addressed. This would be read, recited, or watched (in the case of screenplays or theater pieces). Students would then be encouraged to talk about their personal reactions to the work. This finished, the instructor would then, through an assignment, graphic organizer, or power point presentation, outline the structure of the work and technical elements for students to consider and record.

After this, typically, the instructor would assign a reading to the students from a selection of interviews or expositions by professional writers, actors, or directors. The themes of the readings would be technical or motivational. Sections of the readings would be assigned to groups of students and each group would use a worksheet constructed by the instructor to summarize their section and prepare to outline it in a presentation to the rest of the class. Following this reading and presentation, the instructor gave some technical

information via a power point presentation. Titles of these presentations give clear ideas about their content, and here is a selection: *Dialogue and Narration*, *Plot Development*, *Characterization*, *The Short Story*, and *Modern Poetry Formats*. Due to the frequency of blackouts in Dhaka, the Power Point presentation was often made by lantern and as a lecture using Xeroxed copies of the Power Point slides. The class was normally ended with a reflective activity or a Classroom Assessment Technique developed by Angelo and Cross (1993). Classroom Assessment Techniques are devices, such as a Minute Paper, the Muddiest Point, or a Memory Matrix, among others, that, as Angelo and Cross (1993, p. xiv) state, "...involves students and teachers in the continuous monitoring of students' learning."

Additionally, there were two weekly events/assignments that directly encouraged collaboration. One was Peer Editing. This was an hour-long time when students, using a rubric devised by the instructor, would share their work with each other and get feedback and support. The other assignment was a Reflective Journal. The Reflective Journal was a worksheet devised to have the student reflect on his or her mood, develop new vocabulary, investigate the meaning of a quote, and write out observations from a literary perspective of the world around him or her. The final section of the Reflective Journal worksheet required the student to give his or her worksheet to another student and have that student read and then write a reaction to the student's reflections. This activity encouraged dialogue among students both in writing and verbally.

Findings

Research Question 1: Do students perceive creative writing as motivational?

Question 17 of the 2006 survey (Dougherty, 2006b) asked students to respond either yes or no to the following: "Did you find Creative Writing to be a motivational experience for you?" The response was 100% affirmative. The same question was asked in the 2007 survey (Dougherty, 2007a) and, again, 100% stated, "yes." Question 42 of the 2006 survey, a free response question, asked "Was this class motivational for you? If so, in what areas of your life, academic or private, and in what ways?" The question elicited fifteen responses, all of which stated unequivocally that the experience was motivational. Some selected responses are given here (Dougherty, 2006b):

It was a motivational experience at its best. It prompted me to be creative, let my pen have all the power. Academic-wise, I know I'll be a lot more confident with the way I write.

This class is motivational for me in my academic life because it will help me to do well in my results and as well as in my private life because now I am confident enough I can write something creative.

Yes it was motivational for me. It motivated me to get more serious about my writing. Because before I just had the urge to write but now I have the tools for the job. So hopefully I can produce some thing that is worth at least one read.

When addressed in the 2006 focus groups (Dougherty, 2006a), the student response was to affirm that the class was motivational. The simplest statement was, “Definitely,” and this was met with a choral response of “yes.” From the 2007 survey, we encountered many responses that alluded to this point of motivation. One was quite eloquent:

[Creative writing] encourages people to find new ways of thinking in English and expressing themselves. It improves your vocabulary because you have to read reference materials and decipher them for yourself. It offers you a glimpse into how others express themselves, thereby giving you a wider field in self-expressions (Dougherty, 2007a).

Research Question 2: Does creative writing encourage students to write in English beyond the classroom?

Question 4 of the 2006 Internet survey (Dougherty, 2006b) asked, “Are you going to continue writing creatively?” To this all sixteen respondents stated, “yes.” The same question was asked in the 2007 survey (Dougherty, 2007a) and 100% of the seventeen respondents said, “yes.” Question 6 of the 2006 survey inquired as to how often this creative writing would take place. Eight students (50%) said monthly, five students (31.25%) said weekly, and three students (18.75%) said daily.

When, in Question 7 of the 2006 survey (Dougherty, 2006b), students were asked if they would share their creative writing with the public, all sixteen of the students responded, implying that all of them would share their work

somehow, somewhere. In the same question students were given a choice of outlets to share their creative writing, and they were told that they could select more than one outlet. This is the break down of the responses: two respondents selected public readings (12.50%), six identified newspaper submissions (37.50%), twelve said they would submit to writer’s magazines or journals (75%), six said that they would publish their own work (37.50%), and three (18.75%) stated, “other.”

A free response question from the 2006 survey (Dougherty, 2006b) gave students an opportunity to expand on these choices. Question 32 asked, “If you decide to share your creative work with others, how would you do so?” Fourteen of the students responded, and their responses ranged from showing the work to friends and family to publishing a book. Five of the respondents mentioned showing the work first to family and friends with the implication that positive responses would encourage them to take the work to a wider audience through publication, as one stated, “In magazines or newspapers.” One student stated that he or she would join a club for young creative writers and would try to get work published in magazines or journals. Another student had this interesting comment: “I would like to share my creative works with children that are studying in school. I would encourage them and let them know how important it is.”

This positive response was mirrored in the 2007 survey when 100% of the respondents affirmed their intention to continue writing. Four of the respondents in the 2007 survey elaborated on their responses by explaining that they would submit their work to local magazines and newspapers. Two of the respondents mentioned starting a blog or submitting

their work online. Two others said that they would simply write and share their work with friends and family (Dougherty, 2007a). From the 2007 student focus group, we heard that three of the four participants were actually continuing with their writing. The fourth member established her desire to write but identified time constraints with employment as a hindrance (Dougherty & Khan, 2007a). Students stated that they were publishing poems, articles in local newspapers, some short stories, and had submitted work to be published in the class anthology, *Deshi Dreams* (Dougherty & Khan, 2007a; Dougherty, 2007a).

Research Question 3: Does creative writing in English motivate EFL students to be better users of English?

Question 43 in the 2006 Internet survey (Dougherty, 2006b) asked students to respond affirmatively or negatively to this inquiry: “Does creative writing motivate someone to become a better “user” of English?” Fifteen out of the sixteen students responded in the affirmative (approximately 94%). One respondent stated, “It does motivate someone to become a better user of English, because creative writing shows you the infinite ways in which the language can be manipulated and used to express what you feel like, and that certainly should motivate a person to become a better user of the language.” Another student responded, “Yes, definitely...a better user [of English] as now I have the guidelines inserted into me I can use English in a much more organized way to express myself or my work.” And finally, from the 2006 Internet survey (Dougherty, 2006b), “Yes, as they (the students) gain more confidence in their ability to manipulate words to express emotions, confidence inevitably leads to greater skill.”

This topic was also raised in the 2006 focus group discussions. One student replied (Dougherty, 2006a), “You have to know how to organize and use the language. Creative writing gives us guidelines. So definitely, I am using English words better. I have learned how to organize my thoughts and put them together to express myself.”

Question 16 of the 2006 survey (Dougherty, 2006b) asked students whether they would recommend the Creative Writing course to other students. All sixteen of the students responded, yes, they would (100%). When asked in Question 18 whether Creative Writing should be part of a normal university education, the results were the same. All sixteen students affirmed that, yes, they felt it should be included in a regular university course of studies (100%). From Question 37 (Dougherty, 2006b), which asked whether creative writing benefits those outside the English major, we learned that, 93% of the respondents felt that creative writing would benefit those outside of the English major. One response was quite detailed (Dougherty, 2006b):

Most definitely. I think it benefits those outside the English major very much because . . . non-English majors . . . need writing skills as much as anyone else, too. Non-English majors also need to be made to think about the more passionate side of life that deals with areas other than numbers and money. It’s important for every student to take creative writing courses and explore their creative potential. It’s a feel good course, too. I feel creative writing courses make one feel good about oneself.

Question 29 of the 2007 survey (Dougherty, 2007a) was a free response question that asked whether creative writing motivated someone to become a better “user” of the English language. Of the seventeen respondents, all of them (100%) answered “yes” in a few or many words. There were many cogent remarks, but a few examples were enlightening. One respondent explained that the process of creative writing, and the necessary feedback one receives via peer editing and in presenting one’s work, allows a person to witness their weaknesses and work to improve themselves in those areas. Another respondent explained that creating works of art, and encountering great pieces of literature, has the potential to inspire one and “enrich” one’s English. One student, who wrote the following comment, invoked the concept of enrichment: “Yes, it does motivate someone to become a better ‘user’ of English through the inspiration drawn from creating something and encountering great works of literature that are classics or modern and altogether enriching” (Dougherty, 2007a).

More prosaically, two of the students mentioned improvement in grammar and the four skills would greet someone who strives to write creative works in English. One respondent put it succinctly, “. . . the knack of writing actually compels people to improve their English.” Another student stated that the opportunity to actually use English allowed one to make mistakes and that by committing mistakes and discovering them or having them corrected you learned more, as he stated “. . .than just by talking about them” (Dougherty, 2007a).

The Writers’ Focus Group (Dougherty & Khan, 2007b) picked up this topic of improvements in general English

usage when asked where creative writing might fit as part of the curriculum. One respondent stated, “I have always believed that creative writing should be an integral part of a literature curriculum...I feel creative writing tasks could actually boost/motivate students to improve their English. Also this course would give them a constructive base for *usage*.”

Conclusion

One goal of the researchers is to show that creative writing is a valuable instructional tool in the ESL or EFL classroom. Creative writing is usually considered the domain of the native speaker and not of the EFL or ESL student. In her account of her experience in the class, Jahan (2007), the memoir writer made this clear: “In our country there is not enough opportunity to do such a course that we had done with Dr. Dougherty. So it was quite unusual event for the students who had successfully completed the course” (p. 1).

The researchers believe that creative writing has many positive benefits for the EFL or ESL student. This part of the case study focused on creative writing as a motivational resource in the language classroom. The research data gave clear answers. To reiterate, there were three research questions asked in this part of the case study: (1) do students perceive creative writing as motivational, (2) does creative writing encourage students to write in English outside of the classroom, and (3) does creative writing in English motivate EFL students to be better users of English? Each question may be answered in the affirmative, supported by the data from the Internet surveys, focus groups, and the student who wrote the memoir.

As explained in the introduction, the answers to these questions are important for their universal applicability to EFL and ESL studies. If non-native speakers of English identify creative writing to be beneficial to their second language acquisition, motivational and useful, then it would behoove administrators and teachers of EFL and ESL programs to include creative writing courses, or elements of creative writing, in their curricula.

As one respondent stated in the 2007 survey (Dougherty, 2007a), he found the class to be motivational and useful for his language learning. In his own words,

As a writer this is one of the best things that I could ever be introduced to, as there are rarely such opportunities in Dhaka. It enhances all the skills of language learning in a motivational/inspirational way. I believe teaching language through literature is one of the best ways. The course opened new horizons of ideas, guided me, and gave me exposure and experience in writing/editing as well as the credits and certificate.

Judging from such comments, the experience of creative writing in English was perceived by the students to be motivational and beneficial to their English acquisition.

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