Fundamentals of Creative Writing for Japanese University Students

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In this paper we offer ideas to teachers interested in teaching creative writing to Japanese university students. We describe the planning and execution of such a course as extra-curricular classes and as regular, credit-carrying university classes. Also included are the guidelines and procedures necessary for running these classes and the importance of guiding students to become self-reflective reviewers, who are capable of analyzing and improving their own written pieces.

本論文は、日本の大学生にクリエイティヴ・ライティングを教授する教員にアイデアを提供する事を目的とする。特別なクラスおよび通常クラスのプランニングと実行の方法を具体的に紹介し、学生が自身の作品を分析し、改善する事が出来るようになるように指導することの重要性も指摘する。

"WHY DO you want to hold such a course? Students don't like writing." "What sense does it make to let students who don't have a full grasp of English grammar write English prose?" These were just two of the critical questions we were asked by English teaching colleagues when they heard about our intention to offer creative writing as an extra-curricular English learning program in Tokushima University's English Support Room. We answered that we regard writing fiction as a craft and not as an exclusive art reserved for a restricted circle of "talented writers." Writing can be learned by anyone interested and willing to do so. Having held more than 10 creative writing courses, we can safely claim that when encouraged to write creatively, students were motivated to express themselves via writing in English. Even students with a lower level of English were able to create entertaining and interesting stories full of characters and events that engaged their classmates' and teachers' attentions.

As to the second question, generally speaking, Japanese students' English education at junior and senior high school is focused on studying basic grammar and practicing textual understanding. In introducing creative writing, our aim was to give students the opportunity to actively use their English skills in a relaxed and creative learning environment. As a result, students not only gained confidence through using the language, but also improved their English skills.

Our professional backgrounds, which combine practical and theoretical aspects of writing in English, helped us to develop a creative writing course as an exciting tool for English language

education in Japanese universities. Both of us are not only English teachers with years of teaching experience in Japan, but also writers: Kamata is a critically acclaimed novelist, essayist, and editor, and a Master of Fine Arts candidate at the University of British Columbia; and Guenther is an aspiring writer with a degree in American/British and German literature studies.

By sharing our experiences teaching creative writing, we hope to encourage colleagues who are interested in trying out creative writing in their classes. We will first describe a course that was taught as an extra-curricular program in Tokushima University's English Support Room (an extra-curricular English-learning facility), before going on to explain how similar principles were applied by Guenther in regular university classes for non-English majors. The principles that we see as key factors in both courses are the importance of critical review and self-reflection as described in Vanderslice (2012). Because this kind of course is still unusual in a Japanese context, we include some positive survey data from students, showing their reactions to the course, as well as examples of how their work improved, and some practices and exercises that can be done in creative writing.

Creative Writing as an Extra-Curricular Course

Starting an extra-curricular creative writing course was based on a mixture of necessity and personal interest in writing. Guenther took over administration of the English Support Room in April 2011. At that time, the support room had come to be seen as a clubhouse occupied by a domineering group of students. Members of this group only used English inside the room for very superficial chitchatting, and dominant members scared away any possible new users who wanted to learn English.

In order to re-establish the English Support Room as the extra-curricular English studying facility it was originally supposed to be, several English special programs (ranging from Pronunciation to Polite English) were planned and implemented. Based on his personal interest in literature and writing, Guenther decided to organize a creative writing course with the intention of adding an attractive fun element to these English Special Programs, thereby making students interested in practicing English outside of their regular classes. With Tokushima University being so lucky as to have a professional author among its part-time teachers, Guenther contacted Kamata and asked whether she was interested in teaching a course.

The initial extra-curricular course in creative writing at Tokushima University's English Support Room was advertised through flyers and word-of-mouth. We had decided beforehand that we would be able to accommodate up to eight students at an advanced intermediate level of English or higher and, preferably, with an interest in creative writing. Because few students had any idea of what creative writing entailed, and some were more intent on developing academic writing skills and thus quickly dropped out, the members of the group were in flux for the first few weeks. We wound up with a core group of about six dedicated members including a Colombian student whose second language was English, a Japanese graduate student of English, an undergraduate Japanese student who had studied abroad and developed near native-speaker proficiency in English, and two university instructors who were nonnative English speakers.

Because creative writing tends to be very personal, we hoped to create a safe and relaxed atmosphere in which participants could take risks in their writing without fear of making mistakes. To that end, we held the course not in a regular classroom, but in Guenther's office, which is located next to the English Support Room. We sat around a single table and often shared food. Although we shared our writing with each other, students were instructed to respond in a nonjudgmental manner. For

instance, instead of saying "I like / don't like____," they were encouraged to simply make note of resonant words or phrases.

Introducing the Fundamentals of the Craft of Creative Writing

In the first class, we discussed our literary preferences and writing goals. Following Kamata's suggestion, the group then decided that by the end of the course each participant should have written a short story or poem in publishable form. Kamata showed students early, marked-up drafts of her work, emphasizing that writing is mostly rewriting and that students would have the chance to improve individual pieces of writing with guidance during the course. Although creative writing, by its very definition, allows experimentation and innovation, we wanted students to get an understanding of creative writing as a discipline from the very start. Therefore, we gradually introduced students to basic story structures, such as the three-act format of Freytag's Pyramid (Freytag, 1863 / 1900), and other fundamentals of the craft of creative writing: plot, character, dialogue, point of view, and metaphor.

In an early session on plot, as an exercise in storytelling, students narrated a wordless picture book in rounds (we used *Clementina's Cactus* by Ezra Jack Keats and *Flotsam* by David Wiesner). Students explained what was happening in the illustrations. We also charted the plot points of traditional tales such as "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" and "Momotaro" according to Freytag's pyramid structure and asked students to rewrite the story or a scene from a different point of view, or in a different setting, as an act of critical-creative rewriting (Pope, 2006, p. 130).

In subsequent sessions, we typically began by reading a passage of published writing, analyzing some aspect such as setting or dialogue, and then exploring the topic via writing prompts.

Participants then shared their writing by reading out loud, with the understanding that their work was raw, unrevised, and not ready for serious critique. We gave students the option of keeping their work to themselves in the interest of maintaining a sense of comfort and safety, but students were always willing, even eager at times, to share.

As students developed their understanding of the basic elements of a story, we explored the notion of showing versus telling by comparing newspaper articles and passages from literature that included vivid imagery and strong verbs. We discussed how to create well-rounded characters by imagining flaws, fears, likes, and dislikes of one-dimensional characters such as Momotaro. We also worked on establishing the setting (through various sensory images), creating point of view, and crafting effective beginnings. Additionally, we talked about various forms such as lists (using Sei Shonagan's *The Pillow Book* and Native American chant poems as models) and the six-word story (as made famous by Ernest Hemingway's six-word-story "For sale: baby shoes never worn"), and had students write lists and six-word stories of their own.

Because these sessions were not for credit, and some students were occasionally absent due to job-hunting or academic obligations, two of our goals were to concentrate on one aspect of craft per week and to give students time to write in class. Over a 90-minute period, they were then able to complete a single task and, we hope, feel a sense of accomplishment.

The ultimate goal of our course was to have students write and revise a full-length short story. When students were ready to share drafts of their stories, the work was typed, printed, and distributed to all students. We used a list of nonjudgmental questions, such as "Where is the story set?" and "What kind of a person is the main character?" and discussed each story. The student writer was then able to determine whether or not his or her story had the desired effect and what elements needed work.

Toward the end of the course, students presented finished drafts of stories of 1,500-2,000 words that we discussed again using the same catalogue of questions we had used when revising the first draft. After the stories were revised, they were gathered and published as a collection titled *Jousanjima Campus English Journal.* The idea behind this publication was not only to give the course's participants a feeling of achievement by seeing their stories published, but was also fuelled by our hope of attracting other students to future creative writing courses.

Creative Writing for Credit-Carrying Classes

The following academic year, Guenther created a curriculum based on the extra-curricular creative writing sessions for sophomore students of a required one-semester course of 16 units. Participants in this course were students from departments ranging from General Arts and Sciences to Mechanical Engineering. The general English level in these classes ranged from post-elementary to advanced and class sizes were from 18 to 28 students. As developing and improving a new type of course is a matter of trial and error, it should not come as a surprise that over the 2 years since the course's inception, several adaptations have been made. Allowing students much more time to share their written pieces in class or small groups is just one example of these adaptations, which have been reported elsewhere by Guenther (2013).

As did the extra-curricular creative writing course, the courses held as regular university classes focused on basic aspects of the craft of writing and dealt with a particular aspect, such as plot structure or characters, each week. The goal of the course was to have students write and redraft a final, long piece of over 1,200 words that displayed the students' understanding of the various aspects of creative writing taught in the class. In the first part of the course, students were given timed writing assignments as well as exercises in the craft of fiction. Later in the course, more emphasis was placed on critical-creative repeated rewriting of one crafted piece. By the middle of the course, students had to hand in a first draft of their story, which they would then be required to edit and revise by the end of the semester. In order to help students with this task, several course units were also used for individual reviewing and one-to-one counseling with the teacher on how to improve these drafts.

Scaffolding the Process of Sharing Written Work and Peer Reviewing

The first time students presented their work in class, fellow students were told to applaud in order to show their appreciation. In the following unit, the listeners were then asked to point out one thing they enjoyed about the story presented. At first, students responded with superficial comments such as "I liked the story," without giving a reason why they felt this way. In one class, all students repeated exactly the words of the very first contributor. Here, strict teacher intervention made it clear that such behavior was not helpful and was even disrespectful towards the presenter. As a result, most students gave more in-depth feedback from then on.

From the following unit on, students were told to tell each presenter one point they enjoyed about the story and one point they did not understand or did not like. In preparing students for this, we used a strategy that removed the personal element from the criticism. Students were told to never directly address the presenter when reviewing written pieces. Reviewers should never use *you, he,* or *she,* but rather formulate their criticism in a neutral way. In classes with students of lower English proficiency, students received a handout with helpful phrases for reviewing a classmate's written piece. Another way of guiding students to learn how to critique written pieces is suggested by Vanderslice (2012): Before reviewing a fellow student's written

piece, students can practice by reviewing the work of a published author.

Reviewing was not the only part of our course's regular classes. In order to pass the course, students had to thoroughly revise the draft of a story they had handed in by mid-semester. This revision was based on a combination of the teacher's comments, peers' comments, and the student's own reflections on his or her work. In individual counseling sessions with the teacher, positive points and points to be improved upon were discussed.

Before these sessions, students were given a self-evaluation form based on the one suggested by Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) with the following questions: (a) What do you think you did particularly well in this piece of writing? (b) What do you think is the best part of the piece? Why is this the best? (c) If you were to work on this piece to make it better, what could you do?

This simple self-evaluation/self-reflection was a first step toward helping students to critically review their own writing. During the following individual counseling session, this evaluation was expanded by the teacher's input. At the end of this session, students were then told to do the following: They should meet twice with a classmate. During the first meeting the students should critically read each other's stories. In order to help them with this task, they received the same checklist as the one used by the teacher to grade students' papers (see Figure 1).

After having read the stories, students were asked to write the answers to these questions on paper and pass these papers to each other without further comment. In this way, each student had three different sources of feedback (the aforementioned self-evaluation form, the teacher's input, and a fellow student's feedback) to apply to the story's revision.

The second meeting of the students took place after the revision of the story's content. In this meeting, students again read

each other's stories, this time focusing only on fixing grammatical mistakes. Next, both students worked together to fix the marked grammatical issues. In all classes, students made an effort to revise their stories. Unfortunately, they were not altogether adept at locating grammatical mistakes in one another's writing. In most cases, however, their English compositions were comprehensible. This grammar problem is a point that will need to be improved upon in future courses.

Issues That Arose When Transferring the Formula From Small-Scale, Extra-Curricular Classes to Credit-Carrying Classes

An important part of any creative writing course is that the teacher keeps track of all students' progress, achievements, or problems. Thoroughly reading all the weekly assignments handed in by students as well as writing comments and advice regarding each student's achievements and progress—even without correcting any spelling or grammatical mistakes—turned out to be highly time-consuming. Finding a grading system for the students' course achievements turned out to be a tricky matter, as, in our opinion, grading creativity is something that should not be done because it could result in students becoming unmotivated or discouraged from exploring and enjoying writing. Realizing that there is no such thing as a perfect grading system, we therefore emphasized the acquisition of creative writing skills that had been taught. Assignments were graded by using a checklist developed by Kamata (see Figure 1).

Is the point of view consistent?

Is the setting clear?

Are the characters three-dimensional?

Are there any scenes that need to be developed further?

Does every scene serve a purpose?

Do dialogues have a purpose or are the characters just chatting?

Are words spelled correctly?

Are the sentences grammatically correct?

Figure 1. Checklist for grading creative writing assignments

As the points featured on this checklist had all been taught as part of the course's syllabus, it was possible for the teacher to grade assignments by assessing students' displaying of writing skills and techniques. In weekly assignments, word count was also taken into account for grading. Other factors for deciding students' final grades were attendance and active participation (facilitation of discussions and finishing assignments within a given time). Students also had to show that they had revised their stories according to the input given by the teacher as well as their classmates.

Improvements Made to Students' Writing

Revisions included improving the development of character and plot, tone, and dialogue. The examples given below focus on imagery, as it is easy to show in a short extract. For example, in her story's midterm draft, student A wrote as follows: "Flash and roar of thunder. After *that it was so dark in the classroom."*

The problem with the italicized part was that by using only an adjective (*dark*) to describe a situation, the student failed to create a vivid image that would show readers what was meant by *so dark*. Student A successfully revised this section by creat-

ing the following image: "Flash and roar of thunder. After that it was like the whole classroom was wrapped in a dark grey veil. We could barely see the other students' faces."

Another example shows Student B learning to implement the rule "Show. Don't tell." In this case, this student wrote in his first draft: "He *seemed a little bit confused* about the question." The student failed to show what he meant with the word *confused*. His successful revision used this image: "He rubbed his hands before his breast, then his hands covered his cheeks," thereby showing how the character is obviously at a loss.

Besides these technical aspects, many stories had "holes in the logic" that needed revising. Most problems were probably based on an obvious lack of dedication from the writers, due to not having started to work on their assignments in time. Although students had 8 weeks for writing their midterm draft and were told to start writing this draft as early as possible, many admitted to having begun their work only shortly before the deadline was looming. To give only two examples from a long list of such logic holes, within two paragraphs of one story, a character that had been described as having red hair, all of a sudden appeared with green hair. In another case, a character suddenly turned from a coward who was afraid of mice into a "mighty dragon slayer." Besides improving the story's quality, students could learn the importance of returning to their written piece and not simply regarding their first draft as a fully fledged literary masterpiece.

Student Response to Creative Writing Courses

Since they were first initiated, these creative writing courses have received a very positive reaction from students. In an official school survey, all three creative writing courses were voted among the top 20 classes—out of more than 80 classes (Tokushima University, 2012). In addition, Guenther developed a ques-

tionnaire specially designed for the 54 students in the creative writing classes he was in charge of (Guenther, 2013). The results showed that all except one student increased their interest in literature and writing and all except two, who found the content difficult, increased their motivation to study English. The majority made enthusiastic comments such as the following:

"I learnt to improve my writing." (7 students)

"Up to now I felt my English was not good enough to read or write in English. Having taken this class, I learnt that I could do so and I really want to write stories from now on, in English as well as in Japanese."

"Having been told that we should write freely and without using a dictionary helped me to enjoy writing without worrying. Still there were many times when I felt that I wanted to write much, much better."

These results strongly support the idea that students felt they had not only improved their writing skills, but also their general attitude towards studying and writing in English. As can also be seen in personal comments, several students expressed interest in reading more English literature in the future and one student even went so far as to claim that the course taught him or her "the importance of not being afraid to freely express my opinion."

Students' willingness to actively participate in class was also surprisingly high. From the very first unit, students in all classes volunteered to share their written pieces in class. Students continued to share their work willingly even after we began to discuss the work in class with a more critical eye: "What did you like about the story?" and "What was it you did not understand about the story?"

Due to this active participation, and in order to give as many students as possible the opportunity to present their work, students began presenting in groups of up to four students. Several classes were fully dedicated to presenting especially well-written work to the entire class.

Conclusion

In this paper we wanted to show the exciting possibilities creative writing offers in helping Japanese students improve their English. In spite of the freedom a creative writing class offers students, it should be stressed that creative writing demands dedication from students in order to pass the course. Creative writing also teaches more than just the craft of writing; in a creative writing class, students also learn to reflect on literature (work by published authors, but also pieces written by their classmates). Reflection here means not only the appraisal of the writings of others, but also the ability to be critical of one's own work and to be able to edit and improve it. Editing means both improving the craft aspect of a written piece and also, of course, copyediting. Students were required to check their classmates' works for problematic content and incorrect grammar, thereby helping them to further improve their critical skills.

Through creative writing, students can learn about the craft of writing, as well as how to think critically, skills that will prove useful to students even outside of their English classes. Creative writing also gives students the opportunity to use and improve their English in a creative and stimulating learning environment. In all of the creative writing courses we taught, we gathered many positive experiences, ranging from receiving impressive pieces of fiction written by students to witnessing firsthand how much our students grew as writers. We could also clearly see how our students improved their English. Add to this the joy our students found in these courses and you will

understand that we highly encourage our English teaching colleagues to try out creative writing in their classes, too.

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