

Wanted Poster: Opportunities to Be Creative With a Foreign Language

Nathan D. Crocker

Matsuyama University

Reference Data:

Crocker, N. D. (2025). Wanted poster: Opportunities to be creative with a foreign language. In B. Lacy, M. Swanson, & P. Lege (Eds.), *Moving JALT Into the Future: Opportunity, Diversity, and Excellence*. JALT. <https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTPCP2024-21>

The use of creative writing activities in language classes in Japanese universities is limited. Perhaps one reason is that teachers do not know what creative writing entails or the possible benefits for the language learner. The aim of this paper is to address that by introducing a simple creative writing activity using a wanted poster that can be incorporated into EFL courses. Creative writing is beneficial to language learners in significant ways. Motivation is enhanced by showing students that they can create something new and exciting using the language they already possess. It gives them an opportunity to be playful and take risks with the language. In this paper, I detail the implementation of the activity as well as the pedagogical rationale behind it, and then present examples of student work that exemplify some of the benefits of the activity and creative writing in general.

日本の大学では、言語習得におけるクリエイティブ・ライティングの活用は限られている。その理由の一つは、言語学習者にとってどのような利点があるのかを教師が認識していないことである。本稿では、幅広いEFLの授業に取り入れることができる、指名手配ポスターを使った簡単なクリエイティブ・ライティングのアクティビティを紹介する。さらにこの活動の実施方法と、教師がこの活動から期待できる結果についても考察する。クリエイティブ・ライティングは、EFLの学生にとって非常に有益である。なかでもおそらく最も重要なのは、学生がすでに獲得した言語資源から、新しくエキサイティングなものを生み出す機会を提供することであろう。クリエイティブ・ライティングは、言語を操る練習機会を学生に与えるだけでなく、現時点で、英語を使って何ができるかを示し、学生のモチベーションと自信の向上につなげることができるのである。

Creative writing (CW) has many benefits for language learners but is often overlooked in Japanese university EFL syllabuses (Draper et al., 2021; Maloney, 2019; Smith, 2013). Commentators have presented many possible reasons for its absence. Maloney

(2019) argued that there is a “lingering prejudice” leading to a bias away from creativity towards formal writing (p. 230). He stated, “An evaluation is made where writing a persuasive essay is seen as more relevant to the student’s academic development...than writing a short story” (Maloney, 2019, p. 230). He also points out the circular nature of this argument, as a department’s own grading policy must dictate the nature of the course’s instruction.

Perhaps the most probable reason that CW is not taught more widely in Japan is simply that language teachers are unaware of it as a possible teaching tool. It appears as though many educators who employ CW in the language classroom are writers themselves. Moreover, as Draper et al. (2021) suggests, teachers are understandably reluctant to teach something for which they have had no training.

It is interesting to note that the absence of CW as student output is inconsistent with the use of creative texts as language input. Smith (2013) pointed out the inconsistency that creative works are highly valued for reading, as can be seen in the graded readers that teachers recommend to students. “Yet when EFL teachers ask students to produce written work, they usually ask for well-organised facts and explicit opinions: descriptions, essays, reports” (Smith, 2013, p. 12).

The aim of this paper is to give language teachers who may have no experience in CW a starting point by describing an activity that can be used in an EFL course. It introduces some of the main benefits of CW to the language learner. It then demonstrates the method of presenting the activity to students, examining some of the pedagogical reasoning behind it, followed by examples of student work that exemplify the benefits of the activity and creative writing in general.

Why Use Creative Writing?

Creative writing has many benefits for language learners. It gives teachers the opportunity to introduce activities that have a greater personal relevance for students

than conventional English lessons. Maley (2012) posits that CW can lead to a deeper engagement with the language and a “deeper level of processing” (para. 3). This is based on Craik and Lockhart’s (1972) article, which suggests that a deeper cognitive engagement contributes to stronger memory encoding, based on aspects such as emotional connection and personal relevance.

Another important benefit is motivation. CW can boost motivation by demonstrating to the student what they are capable of with the knowledge they already have. James (2007) states that language learners “emphasise what they don’t know rather than celebrating what they do know” (para. 4). In contrast to this, CW focuses on the language that the student already possesses (Maloney, 2019).

The benefits of CW are not limited to creativity; CW supports academic writing competence and need not be viewed as opposed to formal writing (Maley, 2012; Maloney, 2019; Smith, 2013). Smith (2013) asserts that the writing of poetry is one method to integrate both the literary form and the meaning into an activity. He further notes that poetry with a strict syllable count, like haiku, can help students differentiate between Japanese and English pronunciation. Iida’s 2010 study found that the writing of haiku poems led “students to develop an identifiable voice” (p. 33).

I include CW in my lessons for specific benefits connected to learner motivation, engagement, and confidence. My own observations suggest that in EFL classrooms, students generally work diligently, motivated by the external factor of their grade rather than any desire to improve their English language ability. Therefore, my first goal is to boost student motivation around the use of English generally by highlighting what can be achieved with the English they already possess. It is my aim that through creating and describing a unique character, students realize what they are capable of, complete the CW activities with increased motivation, and consequently use their existing English knowledge with more confidence. Additionally, students complete the activities by creating something tangible that they can hold and share. My second goal is to give students the opportunity to play with language. This play gives the students the opportunity to learn the language in the way that native speakers do as children, through “rhythmical chants and rhymes, word games, jokes and the like” (Maley, 2012, para. 10). Language play can be beneficial to language learners because it fosters positive attitudes towards English and increases motivation and engagement. When learners are enjoying themselves, they are more likely to be engaged and invest more in the learning process (Cook, 2000). An additional benefit of the play arising from CW activities is the realization of a less-threatening classroom environment. This allows language learners to experiment and take risks with less fear of the consequences of mistakes (Cook, 2000).

Key Strengths of the Wanted Poster in the EFL Classroom

The wanted poster activity presented here is based on an idea generation and brainstorming activity that is well-known in creative writing. I have adapted this activity for use in the EFL classroom. It is one of two CW activities that I teach, over two lessons, as part of a Productive Skills course, one focusing on character and one on story. Before the main activities, the class does warm-up exercises consisting of acrostic and stem poems drawn from Maley (2012).

The wanted poster is a dependable CW activity for a number of reasons. The poster is visual, and it is immediately clear to students what the general idea of the activity is. This is helped, in Japan, by the *One Piece manga* and *anime* series, which uses wanted posters in its advertising. This visual nature also means that few new vocabulary words are required to explain what the activity requires. As a result of wanted posters having the specific purpose of helping police locate criminals, the process of creating a character is guided, not only by the teacher’s instructions, but by the function of the poster itself. The writing of the description of the character is scaffolded by students drawing their characters before attempting to describe them. Students are consequently spared the anxiety-inducing feeling that they must write something unique from scratch. The drawing of a *manga*-like character, even if it is not something they enjoy, is something that Japanese students are familiar with.

Wanted Poster Activity

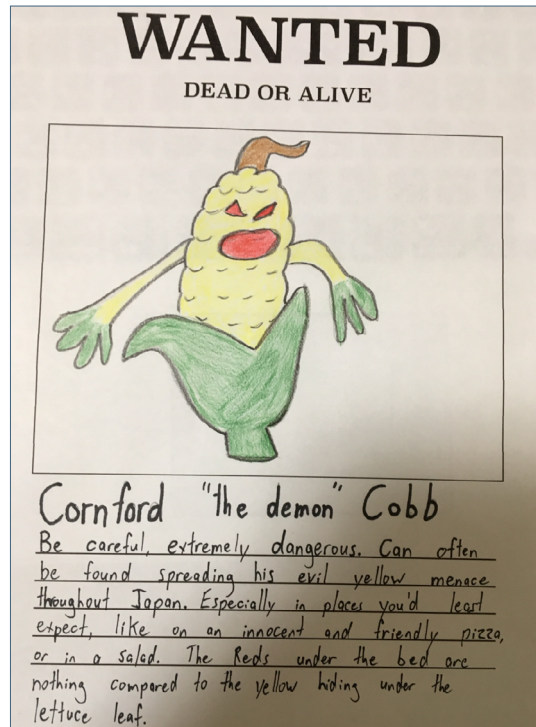
The students are told that they are going to create an original character by making a wanted poster. This character should be a villain, something/someone they do not like, an enemy, or a rival.

Providing Examples

I introduce several of my own examples at the beginning of the activity. The rationale for this is to avoid limiting students’ creativity by providing only one example for them to draw inspiration from. It also allows the teacher to talk about some of the different types of characters that they could create. First, I introduce Cornford “the Demon” Cobb (Figure 1) and tell the story behind this character. I explain that I hate the taste, texture, and smell of corn. When I arrived in Japan, I was surprised by the amount of corn in places I did not expect it. In my country people do not find corn on pizza or in salads, so when I came to Japan it was an unpleasant surprise to see corn used in this way.

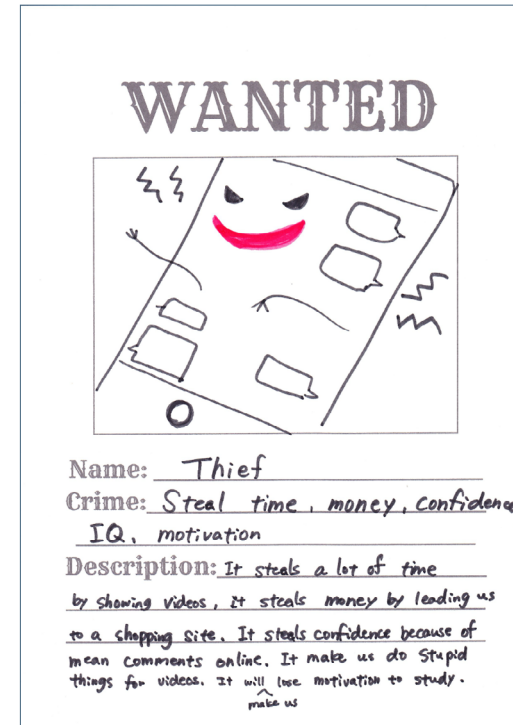
I explain that one of the easiest ways of creating a character is to take something from the real world and make it into a character. In this case, I turned a corncob into a character simply by giving it a face and arms.

Figure 1
Wanted Poster Activity Example 1



The students are then shown a second example: Thief (Figure 2), another example of something from the real world that has been turned into a character, in this case a cell phone with a face and arms. Thief is wanted for stealing time (by showing people interesting videos), money (by taking people to shopping sites), and confidence (by showing mean comments).

Figure 2
Wanted Poster Activity Example 2



Students are then shown a third example: 八方[happou] Beautiful (Figure 3). *Happou* is a Japanese idiom that literally translates to “eight-direction beautiful person.” It is used to describe people who are kind and positive to everyone regardless of their own feelings and opinions and often implies that they are insincere or two-faced. This example is used to show students that their character does not have to be a physical object – it could be an emotion or an idea. 八方 Beautiful is wanted because it is a common practice to put on a positive face towards society and not show one’s real feelings. However, this can eventually lead to emotional stress.

Figure 3
Wanted Poster Activity Example 3



Brainstorming

Students have 5 minutes of brainstorming time to think about the character they would like to draw. At this stage, the students are given these prompts:

- Who is the character?
- What does it look like?
- What crime has it committed? Why is it your enemy/rival? Why is it wanted?
- What is its name?

Drawing

The students then have 10 minutes to draw their character and are given these prompts:

- What does your character look like?
- Is it big or small?
- Does it carry anything (a bag, a weapon)?
- Does it wear any special clothes?

Writing

Then students have 10 minutes of writing time and they are encouraged to include these points as part of their description:

- the character's name,
- information about what the character has done – why the character is wanted,
- a description of what the character looks like,
- where the character was last seen, and
- what the reward will be if this character is caught.

Follow-Up

The posters are then collected for me to read and comment on. In the following lesson they are returned, and students are encouraged to take my comments into account. They then have time to make changes before presenting their character to a small group.

Development of the Activity

Use of the wanted poster activity originated from a confluence of ideas. I was looking for an activity that would help students make their own creative decisions, as well as enable CW without having to start from a blank page. I knew that wanted posters were used in the advertising for the *manga One Piece*, and I had observed how many students enjoyed drawing characters before class.

My use of the wanted poster activity has developed over several years. Minor developments include the amount of space allocated for drawing and writing on the poster itself, as well as whether to include the prompts (name, crime, description, and last seen). I have experimented with omitting these prompts and found that it allows

Crocker: *Wanted Poster: Opportunities to Be Creative With a Foreign Language*

the more proficient students more room for creativity, while some of the less proficient students require the extra support that the prompts offer to write their description.

Further Examples of Wanted Posters

As noted above, it is important to show a variety of examples to avoid narrowing the creative scope of what is possible from the activity. The first time I taught the activity I only had Cornford “the demon” Cobb (Figure 1) as an example. In that class, the majority of students chose to create personifications of foods they did not like. As a result, I now use several examples, attempting to show the range of creative possibilities. These extra examples also provide the opportunity to give some simple ideas on character creation. Examples of personification of inanimate objects are provided in Figures 1 and 2, and the use of an abstract idea is shown in Figure 3. They also allow the teacher to present both humorous (Figure 1), and more serious (Figures 2 and 3) approaches to character creation.

Splitting the Activity into Sections

The decision to split the activity into clearly delineated sections: brainstorming, drawing, writing, was made to practically simplify classroom management. When I first used the activity, I explained the instructions in detail, then allowed the students to start drawing without imposing a time restriction. As a result, when I encouraged students to move on from drawing, they were reluctant to abandon the creations that they were in the middle of drawing. This also created the problem of having students at different stages of the activity. Giving clear time limits has solved these issues. It clearly provides students with the teacher’s expectation of how long they are allowed to draw, and the time limit also provides a target for students to work toward.

Splitting the activity into clear sections and being strict about time limits has not imposed a more formal tone on the activity. During the activity there is a lot of laughter as students share their drawings and their attempts to find the perfect word to describe their characters with their classmates.

Completing the Activity Over Two Lessons

The decision to complete the activity over two lessons was made for two reasons. First, the goal was to alleviate some of the anxiety that a student might feel when asked to

present their work to classmates. Second, I wanted to help students develop the potential of their characters. I see the teacher’s role as providing positive comments on what has already been achieved and offering practical advice to elaborate on ideas that have not been sufficiently expressed. “Sufficiently expressed” refers to how well a poster could be understood by another student in the class. The aim is that students feel supported by having their work validated by the teacher, and if they include any of the teacher feedback, feel the safety of it being a collaborative effort. The feedback and revision process is similar to that of any multiple-draft writing course. This supports claims that CW supports academic writing competence and need not be seen as completely separate (Iida, 2010; Maley, 2012; Maloney, 2019; Smith, 2013).

Student Output: Characters

In this section I present examples of student work that exemplify the benefits of the wanted poster activity and of CW in general. I have received informed written consent for all student work discussed and presented in this article.

From the examples and instructions they are presented with, students seem to be able to create a wide range of characters. Some students take the main idea of an example that has been presented and change it in a small way. There is often a *natto* or *goya* character that may have been inspired by my example in Figure 1. This does not mean that the character is without creative merit: One student created a character named Breathing Bitter Gourd, who had the power to breathe onto any food and make it bitter. In my experience, students take the activity seriously and produce unique and thought-provoking characters.

Examples of Student Output

The following examples (Figures 4 and 5) show how original and creative the characters can be. These examples are both humorous and suggest students are playfully engaging with the drawing of the character and language during the creation process. Both examples have serious undertones.

Figure 4
Student Example 1

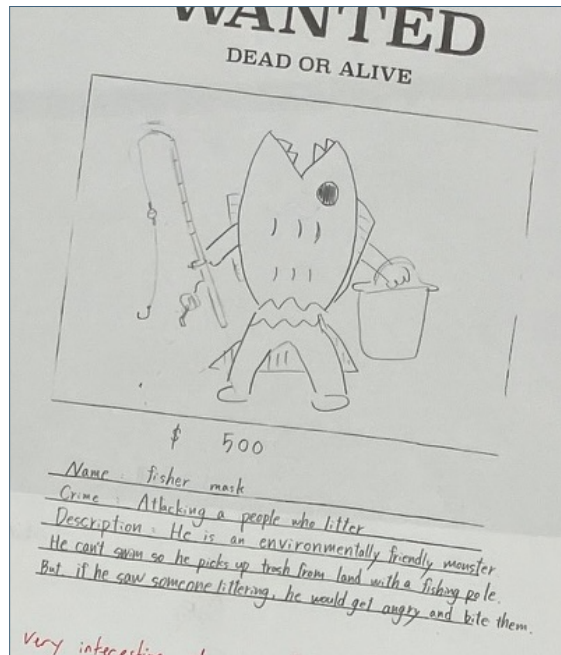


Figure 4 shows the student's drawing and description of a character named Fisher Mask, whose crime is described as "attacking a people who litter." The character is further described as follows: "He is an environmentally friendly monster. He can't swim so he picks up trash from land with a fishing pole. But, if he sees someone littering, he would get angry and bite them." The humorous aspect of the drawing and description of the character lies in the sharp contrast between the terms "environmentally friendly," which usually has positive connotations, and "monster," which are juxtaposed to describe the character. Moreover, the image itself and the idea of someone trying to pick up trash with a fishing pole are delightfully absurd. These aspects of the work suggest that the student is enjoying the process of playfully describing the character. Underlying the comic aspects of the character are serious themes of environmental damage and sadness at loss of habitat and home. Although the monster is "wanted," his story suggests that the writer has sympathy for this character.

Figure 5
Student Example 2

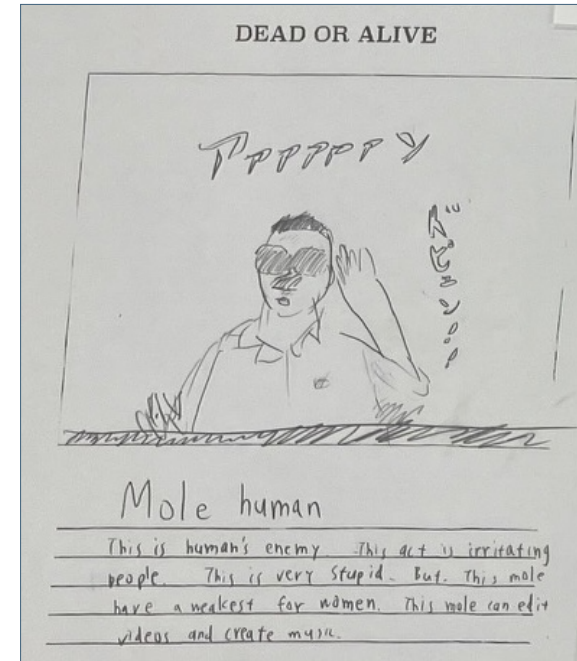


Figure 5 shows a character named Mole Human, which is described as follows: "This is human's enemy. This act is irritating people. This is very stupid. But. This mole have a weakest for women. This mole can edit videos and create music." This character is also humorous with an underlying depth. The drawing highlights the mole-like characteristics of the character, with pointed nose and dark eyes. Phrases in the description like "This is human's enemy," and "This act is irritating people," suggest that the writer is ridiculing people with these characteristics. The student told me that this character is a YouTuber, which does not come through clearly on the poster. This is an important point because the student is using the personification of a mole to make fun of common stereotypes of YouTubers: specifically, they spend a lot of time shut away in their rooms filming and editing videos. YouTubers are generally seen as charismatic, while recording and editing video is a solitary activity, generally undertaken in a

Crocker: *Wanted Poster: Opportunities to Be Creative With a Foreign Language*

darkened room. This student has made the comparison with moles, suggesting that this mole-like character spends a lot of time on his computer and is somewhat cut off from human society. The syntactic structures, which are all very simple with basic grammatical errors, show that even students writing at a low level of proficiency can create unique characters with compelling stories.

The above examples use humor to good effect in both the drawings and the descriptions of the characters. The first example (Figure 4) uses juxtaposed language and an absurdly comic-horror drawing to achieve this, while the second example (Figure 5) uses the personification of a mole to ridicule YouTubers. Both works strongly hint at a playful engagement with language in the creation of these characters. In addition, my observations of excitement and laughter during the class suggest that students achieve a heightened level of engagement with English that gives them the opportunity to enhance their confidence and motivation.

Two further examples portray characters that have internal conflicts, exploring the ways in which people present themselves to the world and how they can be misunderstood. The choice to create characters like these requires some degree of creative risk because of the possibility that classmates will identify the internal conflict with the writer.

Figure 6 shows a character named Flowers that Hides its True Self, and the student writes, “I look like I am very angry. However, I am kind and want to talk to everyone.” This student has interpreted the activity differently from those in the previous examples. Instead of writing about a character who is wanted, he/she has written from the point of view of the character. Writing in first person generally creates a sense of closeness and immediacy because the reader is connected directly with the character’s experiences and emotions. The sentences are not complex but the student is able to make a comparison between an exterior self that the world sees and the person’s internal thoughts. The character’s exterior features discourage people from approaching them for conversation. The flower also suggests delicacy and fragility, and the very idea of “a flower that hides itself” is almost a contradiction in terms, certainly an unusual visual image.

Figure 6
Student Example 3

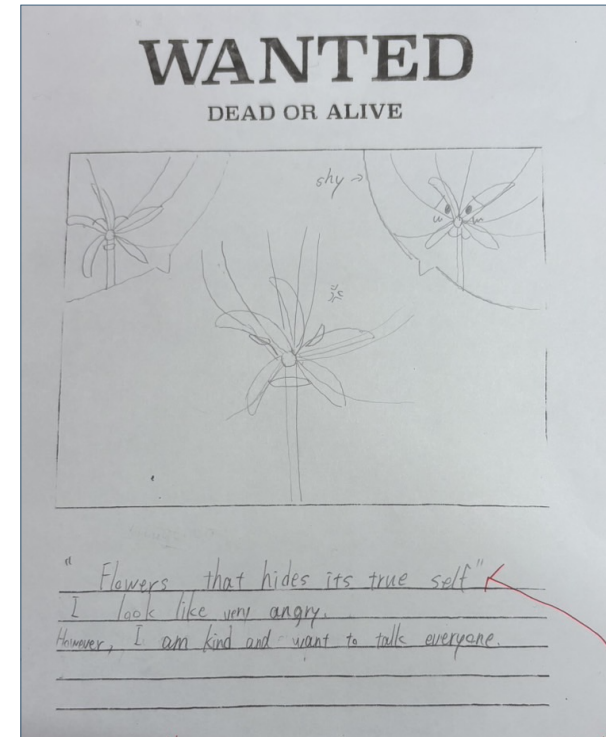


Figure 7
Student Example 4

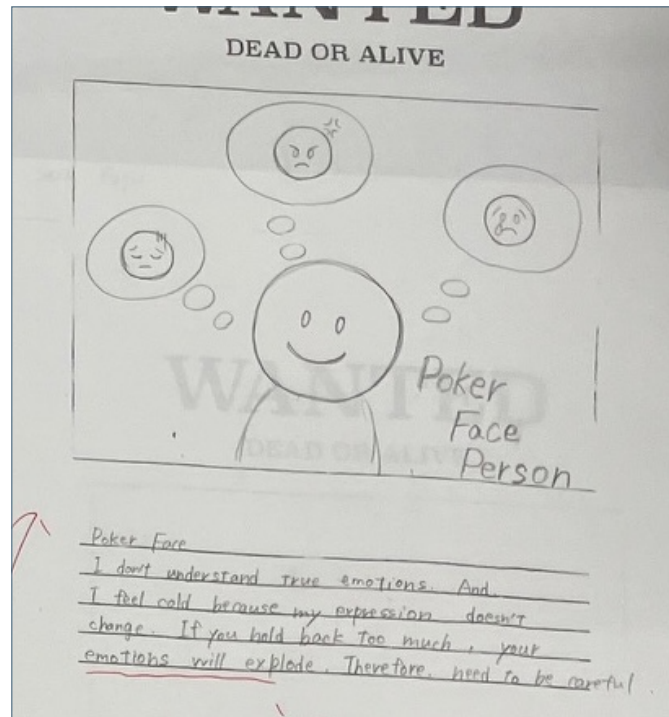


Figure 7 shows a character named Poker Face. As in Figure 6, this student has written from the point of view of the character. The student writes, “I don’t understand true emotions. And I feel cold because my expression doesn’t change. If you hold back too much, your emotions will explode. Therefore, need to be careful.” This student has also written in the first person. The first sentence is startling because it is a simple and frank admission that there is something crucial missing from the character’s understanding of life. The word “cold” is used to describe a lack of emotional reaction to things. The writer implies that this is clearly not a healthy way to live and ends with a warning and strong personal image: “If you hold back too much, your emotions will explode.”

These two examples portray internal conflicts, in contrast to the external conflicts (environmental and social) shown in previous examples, and both are serious in tone. Two important things are happening in terms of language play and engagement. The students are taking creative risks by using their characters to reveal something about their own feelings. Creative risk-taking can be indicative of a deeper engagement with the activity, and therefore language, because a less threatening learning environment reduces anxiety, and learners are motivated to try new things (Cook, 2000). By making their characters reflective of their own internal conflicts, students are also creating something that they can connect with personally and engaging with the activity in what Maley (2012) would describe as “a deeper level of processing than with expository texts” (Maley, 2012, para 9).

Observations

Whether the students approach the activity in a lighthearted way (as in the first two examples above), or in a way that shows self-reflection and internal conflict (the latter two examples), these examples suggest a playful engagement with the activity, and a more personal connection with the language than in other EFL activities (Cook, 2000; Maley, 2012). The students who choose to portray characters that are suggestive of their own inner conflicts may be engaging with the language at a deeply personal level (Cook, 2000; Maley, 2012). The fact that they are comfortable enough to create a character with a personal connection suggests that a less threatening classroom environment has led to lower anxiety and willingness to take risks (Cook, 2000).

As noted earlier, this activity creates a less formal classroom atmosphere with a lot of laughter. Students are enthusiastic about sharing their creations and descriptions with their classmates. Another benefit is that this enthusiasm extends to those students who are otherwise less responsive. In fact, my anecdotal observations are that the students who are usually more reserved in class are often the ones who enjoy the activity the most. These observations suggest that through play, and consequently a more relaxed atmosphere, students become less anxious about using English in front of their peers (Cook, 2000; Maley, 2012).

Conclusion

This paper shows how a teacher unfamiliar with CW might teach a CW activity as part of an EFL language course. It outlines the methodology of the activity, describes the motivations behind some of the pedagogical decisions, and presents examples of the

Crocker: *Wanted Poster: Opportunities to Be Creative With a Foreign Language*

type of work students produce. Examples of student work shows how elements such as play and playfulness can lead to increased engagement with the language, and how the less threatening atmosphere of the CW lesson can lead to reduced stress and a greater willingness from students to use English in front of their peers. Furthermore, it shows what students are capable of when they are given the opportunity to use English in a less constrained manner than in typical EFL lessons. It suggests that a lesson or two of CW is not a lesson wasted but an opportunity for students to reinforce what they already know by stretching and manipulating the language (Maley, 2012). By allowing students to show what they are capable of achieving with the English they already have, it is possible to avoid the demotivating factors of lessons focusing on knowledge gaps and see the added benefits of increased confidence and motivation (Maloney, 2019).

Bio Data

Nathan Crocker is an adjunct lecturer at Matsuyama University and Okayama University of Science (Imabari Campus). His research interests are creative writing in language acquisition and the creation of in-class activities to supplement extensive reading programs. c.nathan@g.matsuyama-u.ac.jp

References

- Cook, G. (2000). *Language play, language learning*. Oxford University Press.
- Craik, F. I. M., & Lockhart, R. S. (1972). Levels of processing: A framework for memory research. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 11(6), 671–684. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0022-5371\(72\)80001-x](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0022-5371(72)80001-x)
- Draper, L., Hillis, M., & McIlroy, T. (2021). Creative writing in language teaching contexts [Conference report]. *Journal of Literature in Language Teaching*, 10(1), 49–55.
- Iida, A. (2010). Developing voice by composing haiku: A social-expressivist approach for teaching haiku writing in EFL contexts. *English Teaching Forum*, 48(1), 28–34.
- James, G. (2007). Writing creatively in another language *TEFL.net*. <https://tefl.net/elt/ideas/writing-ideas/writing-creatively-in-another-language>.
- Maley, A. (2009). Creative writing for language learners (and teachers). *TeachingEnglish*. <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/professional-development/teachers/understanding-learners/articles/creative-writing-language>.
- Maley, A. (2012). Creative writing for students and teachers. *Humanising Language Teaching*, 14(3). <http://old.hltmag.co.uk/jun12/mart01.htm>.

- Maloney, I. (2019). The place of creative writing in an EFL university curriculum. *Bulletin of Nagoya University of Foreign Studies*, 4, 229–251. <https://nufts-nuas.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/1265> <https://doi.org/10.1390290699878458880>
- Smith, C. (2013). Creative writing as an important tool in second language acquisition and practice. *The Journal of Literature in Language Teaching*, 2(1), 12–18.