

IS THERE HOPE FOR CREATIVE WRITING IN OUR EFL CLASSROOMS?

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ABSTRACT

Creative writing must have a place in the English as a Foreign Language [EFL] classroom at Universidad Tecnológica Oteima. Timing, disbelief, and curricula have been keeping us from allowing creativity and imagination to sculpt the process of writing of our students. Even though we must be faithful to the teaching of the mechanics and style of writing, we owe our students the opportunity to express their inward journeys when they write. As a result, when writing becomes a conduit to articulate the endless struggle to live, learning a second language is no longer an ongoing proof of linguistic competence, but some pedagogy to human development. In short, language learning, first and second, becomes an authentic translator of what is growing, cognitively and affectively, in our restless hearts. Surely, there must indeed be hope for creative writing in the EFL classroom.

Keywords: Creative writing, EFL learning and teaching, imagination, aesthetics, self-awareness.

1. INTRODUCTION

We have been teaching English as a Foreign Language [EFL] and Spanish as a Foreign Language [SFL] writing for quite a while. Many theories of second language teaching have given birth to countless techniques and strategies to provide our students with the necessary skills to immerse themselves into the art of writing in a second language. We have witnessed how the knowledge of the mechanics and rules of writing have really made an impact on how our students express and organize their ideas to form sentences, paragraphs, essays, monographs and even research papers. We have seen the look of awe in their faces when their writing has been read by their peers, by faculty members, and even published in paper and digital journals. Consequently, they have finally seen themselves as more than just students, but maybe as writers (Earnshaw, 2007) for the first time.

There is no greater satisfaction for teachers than to see their students accomplish that goal of finally being able to possess some sort of linguistic competence beginning to happen or already happening in their second language writing performance. On the other hand, can we just be academically satisfied as EFL writing teachers when our students show mastery of the rules of punctuation, capitalization and spelling, the appropriate use of connectors, the pre-writing, drafting and the revising processes, the semantic recognition of words, and the capability to construct syntactically well-structured sentences and paragraphs that permeate unity and coherence in a composing process?

Robert Frost once wrote “unless one surprises oneself as a poet, one will never surprise a reader” (Harper, 2010 p.25). We all know quite well that writing goes beyond style and mechanics. Writing is not just a way to communicate information, scientific explanations, or restating the ideas of prominent authors. Essentially, writing also has the sacred mission of moving the hearts of readers. Consequently, there is a kind of writing that helps readers see in the creation of a writer the reflection of feelings, fantasies, and experiences (Miller, 2019) that they themselves cannot sometimes articulate on their own. Undoubtedly, we are talking about creative writing, the one that surprises the human mind and soul.

The fundamental purpose of this article is to reflect upon attempting to define creative writing, arguing whether creativity can be taught, providing some creative writing hints for the EFL classroom, and offering some conclusions that could point out to the ultimate pedagogical foundation of creative writing and reading. As a result, through this reflective article, we wish to make a curriculum proposal so creative writing should be included as a subject to the upcoming revision of the interdisciplinary structure of the Bachelor of Arts with a concentration in English at Universidad Tecnológica Oteima. In sum, by connecting all these concepts and applications regarding creative writing, we want to make a statement: should we, EFL teachers, limit ourselves to only lead our students to follow the rules of the mechanics of writing and make them mere communicators of written information? Or are we called to invite them to find in writing a place where their spiritual energies and intellectual potentialities can be explored and expressed? This article is divided into three parts: a definition of creative writing, the role of creativity and imagination, and how through a group therapy model, EFL teachers can promote creative writing.

2. Creative writing: a definition

First, to examine the importance of creative writing in the English as a Foreign Language [EFL] classroom, it is indeed imperative to define what creative writing is. The word creativity can be traced back to the Latin verb “creare” which can be translated as “to bring something into being”, to produce something, or to give life out of one’s own hands (Ramet, 2007). Creative writing like art is subjective, and therefore, it is very difficult to define in scientific terms. There is no doubt that fiction and poetry are understood as creative writing, but what about journal writing, articles and essays, memoirs, and biographies? Are these forms of writing that lack the necessary creativity requirements that constitute creative writing? Where do we draw the line between creative writing and other types of writing? How far do the creativity, imagination, and the language of the heart of a writer must travel to find himself or herself in the universe of creative writing? (Miller, Nigh, & Binder, 2019).

In most cases, what qualifies as creative is usually as clear as water. We read a piece of work and we know that it pertains to the creative world. Why? Because we distinguish creative writing from other forms of writing when what we read touches something deep inside of us, transforms the way we see and understand what surrounds us, and moves us into the horizon of change and self-awareness (Kellen, 2009). Other times, a piece of writing of our English as a Foreign Language [EFL] students, while skillful in terms of the mechanics of writing, might not strike us as creative at all. And then, there is everything in between: writing that is somehow creative or not quite creative enough.

Even though we have struggled to define creative writing in the educational system for quite a while, Harper (2010) states that we know that the road of creative writing is anything where the purpose of language is to express thoughts, feelings, and emotions rather than just conveying information. The line that separates creative writing from other types of writing is not drawn between fiction and nonfiction. Nonfiction writing indicates that it is rooted in fact, but it could also be quite creative because it may be written with emphasis on decoding the mystery of language and the crafting of writing. In short, creativity is the key word that determines that kind of human depth of a given written piece of creative writing.

3. Creativity and imagination

Secondly, we can naively ask ourselves, as teachers, if creativity could be taught or even more specifically if creative writing could be taught in a formal educational setting. The debate whether creative writing can be taught at all is not something new. It was present back then in the enrollment of that first course given at the State University of Iowa in those pre-Second World War times. Dev, Marwah, & Swati (2009, p.13) states that “the answer to that question whether creative writing can be taught is both no and yes. Creative writing courses may not be able to create a writer, but they help identify and hone writing skills”. In our classrooms, we can testify to the amounts of imagination, originality, and artistic expression that our students innately possess despite the little time we must walk with them that extra mile that implies getting involved with their inner life while implementing the tools of all linguistic skills (Dev, Marwah, & Swati, 2009).

On the other hand, psychologists agree that creativity is very often linked to imagination. And imagination is a whole new world that a lot of students miss the chance to explore due mostly to the lack of learning spaces (Venugopal, 2014) that the linguistic curriculum fails to put together to achieve that goal (Rolheiser, 2004). But there is also a responsibility that lies on us when we fail our students and ourselves by not paying close attention to their sensitivity and uniqueness not only as students, but nevertheless, as persons with feelings and dreams, painful and frustrating experiences (Seth, 2021) that could be expressed in a process of creative writing. These cognitive, spiritual, and empirical capabilities in our students are often gone unnoticed by our own eyes as learning facilitators of both the mechanics of writing and the art of writing. If we only dare to believe in the unimaginable possibilities that could come up in an English as a Foreign Language [EFL] classroom, we would be able to motivate our students to become like the “Little Prince” (written by Antoine of Saint-Exupéry), the one who was capable to see what was invisible to eyes of most because of the exteriorization of his imagination and creativity.

Creativity is at the same time an innate and experienced-based endeavor. Creativity is born in the humanity of each of our students, but it is reborn with every experience they have in life, whether painful or joyful; that, consequently, reshapes who they are, and how far their imagination is willing to fly (Gallegos, 2013). We believe that these internal energies can fly millions of miles away if creative writing makes itself a home in the EFL classroom even with the limitations of the different levels of English language proficiency of our students. On the other hand, a lot of critics of creative writing programs make multiple claims. They say, according to Menand (2009), that these programs drop writers in a deserted island far away from real life experiences, and therefore, uniform all writing styles. They also acknowledge that creative writing courses turn literature into a plain educational activity.



4. Creativity and the composing process: humanistic group therapy and EFL teaching

Thirdly, if we strongly believe that there is a vocation underneath our profession to teach English as a foreign language, we will help our students find their voice, supporting their ideas, opinions, and being concerned with what they are writing, and not merely with how well they are communicating information in a composition (Grainger, Gooch, & Lambirth, 2005). We have stated above that we cannot make creative writers in the English as a Foreign Language [EFL] classroom. However, we do have the obligation to feed our students' imagination by running up creative moments in the quite busy schedule of the EFL class. We do not have such a machine yet that produces creative writing robots. Furthermore, teachers who inspire creativity have a sound comprehension of what it means to be creative (Hinzpeter, 2012). Enhancing creative capability, autonomy, and intuitive knowledge must be a criterion that should not be missing in our attempts to teach creative writing to EFL students (Grainger, Gooch, & Lambirth, 2005). Therefore, how do we launch teaching moments in the EFL classroom that will permit creative writing growth?

Of the many teaching methods that are out there available for the teaching of fiction, literature, and creative writing, we will go in detail with just one crucial and very effective teaching strategy that while keeping track of the mechanics of writing, it also establishes a platform where our students may let their creativity and imagination enrich their composing process. We are talking of a therapeutically psychological procedure called "group therapy," but in Applied Linguistics, group therapy principles and guidelines serve to wake up the language of feelings that our globalized society forces our students to shut down. First, students arrange their seats forming a circle and give a start of pre-writing process that could last from 45 minutes to an hour. The teacher is part of the circle, too. However, he or she is there not just to facilitate language learning, but to move and challenge the students to speak up not about information or events, but about feelings, memories of feelings, and empathy towards other students' experiences. Next, once a student opens about an emotion-related experience, the rest of the class asks him or her questions that will help him or her go deeper in such a way that at this stage he or she can formulate verbal sentences that may resemble uniqueness, authenticity, and expressing creativity. Empathy is a key denominator in this equation of feelings (Burns, 2009).

In a second stage of this creative writing group therapy, the students who have participated in the round like sharing try to capture in a sentence or two the emotions and the empathy that they have nurtured when listening to their peers opening up about their joys to be re-celebrated, their wounds to be healed, and their dreams to be cultivated (Rolheiser, 2004; Gallegos, 2013). These sentences are read aloud by each student. The objective of this step in this creative writing process is to try to transform what could have been a mere emotional breakdown into an opportunity to create art with the written language, and as a result, turning this therapy experience into an opportunity to create the habit of been in touch with one's feelings (Damasio, 2021): an obligatory experience to anyone attempting to be a creative writer.

Without any hesitation we can assume that this second stage is mostly a feedback experience. Everyone who has opened his or her heart to the EFL class and the facilitator needs to always feel that his or her deepest feelings and memories will be cherished and treasured (Rogers, 1961). These two first stages will lead the students to write a poem, an essay, a brief memoir, or even a song that shall be faithful to both: the summarizing sentences that were given to them by their peers as feedback and the authenticity and self-awareness of the feelings (Damasio, 2021) they expressed in the linguistic group therapy. A sharing of the last revision of the writing outcome of this group therapy should be brought to the group, not only to go through the revision of the mechanics of writing, but to capture the emotional impact that such a piece of writing has had in all therapy session participants (Rogers, 1961). Have they responded with surprise, wonder and awe to their peers' piece of creative writing? Have they felt the passion of the written word communicated by their classmates?

5. CONCLUSION

Finally, we must assert that a creative writer ought to be a creative reader. Reading comprehension becomes the safe linguistic methodology that will open the doors of the creative writing kingdom to our English as a Foreign Language [EFL] students. Consequently, once reading becomes a habit, a delight, and an exploration of creativity, our EFL students will feel quite well at home when writing with their hearts the stories about how they have been coping with life so far and how they want to inspire readers with their dreams and hopes for the future. Every single day, a creative writer finds himself or herself walking through a sometimes obscure and impenetrable forest that challenges him or her to be self-aware, craft-conscious, and self-critical. As a result, it is again obvious that creativity does not come up in the form of creative writing without a price. The fruits of creative writing come with the pain of being creative.

There is a point that we want to make at the very end of this article. Language in all its forms is the instrument that allows us to communicate with the exterior world, but it is also the indenture that allows us to exteriorize that inner world that makes us human, unique, and lovable in the eyes of God. Therefore, when we use language to communicate, when we speak, but especially, when we write, something more than a linguistic experience is taking place. We believe that when we encourage our English as a Foreign Language [EFL] students to try to express themselves through creative writing, we are unconsciously giving them an opportunity to grow as human beings (Peters & De Alba, 2012). Whenever writing helps us to express who we are, what we feel, and empathetically feel what others feel, we become better people, more human and more authentic. We believe that in the exercise of creative writing, we intrinsically promote human development. Accordingly, there is no better sign of hope for creative writing in the EFL classroom when it fulfills its purpose of feeding creativity while making us, students, and teachers, more human. As a result, it is in making us more aware of our humanity that we meet the ultimate pedagogical foundation of creative writing and reading.



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