

CREATIVE WRITING ACTIVITIES AT ACADEMIC LEVEL

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Abstract: The paper represents a research that highlights the theoretical and practical importance of creative writing activities used in the educational process at academic level. Writing activities are perceived by most students as boring and time-consuming activities, but, if done in a communicative, creative manner this may provide the success of this skill, developing both general and specific competences that philology undergraduates need to acquire as part of their academic achievement.

The conclusion reached at the end of the study shows that creative writing helps students not only in developing their English writing skills, but also motivates them a lot in improving their English as creativity is a great motivator and it gives the possibility of some sort of achievement to everyone, making classes more fun and more interesting.

Keywords: writing, skill, competence, improvement, students.

BACKGROUND

Teaching English has become very important recently because more and more foreign languages begin to be present in the life and work of the people at every turn. In a comfortable, well-chosen and harmonized ambience, students' intelligence and creativity grow as they learn how to express their ideas and feelings. Creativity is a great motivator because it makes people interested in what they are doing. Creativity gives hope that there can be a worthwhile idea. Creativity gives the possibility of some sort of achievement to everyone. Creativity makes life more fun and more interesting.

Writing in a foreign language is difficult. It presupposes mastery of a number of language areas such as spelling, grammar and vocabulary, as well as skills like handwriting and punctuation. This is probably why writing is usually not a favorite activity with students. For this reason writing needs to be made creative, communicative and enjoyable.

The term “creative writing” suggests imaginative tasks such as writing poetry, stories and plays. Such activities have a number of features to recommend them. Chief amongst these is that the end result is often felt to be some kind of achievement, and that “most people feel pride in their work and want it to be read” (Ur 1996, p. 169). This is significantly more marked for creative writing than for other more standard written products.

Creative writing is “a journey of self – discovery, and self- discovery promotes effective learning” (Gaffield – Vile, 1998, p. 31). When teachers set up imaginative writing tasks that their students are thoroughly engaged in, those students frequently strive harder than usual to produce a greater variety of correct and appropriate language than they might for more routine assignments. While students are writing a simple poem about someone they care about, or while they are trying to construct a narrative or tell stories about their childhood, for example, they are tapping into their own experiences. This provides powerful motivation to find the right words to express such experience.

Creative writing is one area, like painting and composing where the imagination has a chance to run free. White and Arndt (1989, p. 24) describe an approach that “views all writing – even the most mundane and routine – as creative”. Such an approach would even include, at some level, the putting together of a shopping list. But we are concerned here with tasks that provoke students to go beyond the everyday, and which ask them to spread their linguistic wings, take some chances, and use the language they are learning to express more personal or more complex thoughts and images. There are two dimensions to creative activity in the classroom – the generating of ideas and the evaluative judgment of someone else’s creative product. Evaluation does not only involve passive appreciation, it can also inspire creative response; for example, writing can be inspired by music or pictures; drama or dance can be stimulated by reading a story or poem. Learners can respond creatively in a wide range of ways. As Bearne (2009, p. XVII) points out, students “now have available to them many forms of text which include sound, voices, intonation, stance, gesture, movement, as well as print and image.” They

are familiar with creating and interpreting multimodal texts, as well as working on artistic interpretations of their ideas.

Essentially it is the engagement of the imagination that will determine the breadth and depth of an experience, and the consequent learning. As Hughes, quoted by Goodwin (2004, p. 2), states: "...imagination, with its delicate writing of perceptions, is our most valuable piece of practical equipment. It is the control panel for everything we think and do, so it ought to be education's first concern".

Creative writing can offer avenues of expression, build reading and writing skills, as well as the much needed confidence in the classroom. Creative writing also fosters self-esteem and builds important communication bridges between learners and the teachers who work with them. The purpose of creative writing activities is to encourage self-expression. Besides developing creativity, these activities can reduce the affective filter, foster self-esteem, enhance communication skills and improve students' interest and confidence in learning to read and write in a second language. Some examples of creative writing activities may include: *three minute free-write, the journal, writing notes, writing about pictures, ten impossible things, writing role cards, writing notices, dreams, writing messages, making up stories, memories, music writing, future writing, shaped poetry* etc.

THE EXPERIMENT

The experiment consisted in applying creative writing activities during the English practical courses with Philology students enrolled in their second year of study. The activities used with one group of 18 students are presented below.

Collocations feature in many collocations, idioms and expressions; they also have symbolic meaning that may differ according to culture. For this activity I divided the class into 5 groups and I gave each group a colour: white, black, red, blue and green. Then, each group received slips of paper with colour collocations or idioms and, working in groups, students had to find the right definition for the idiom and make a sentence in which to illustrate its meaning. The idioms they were given and the right answer which was not provided until the students gave their own explanations and shared their answers to the other teams are shown in the tables below.

RED – examples

a red-letter day	get the red-carpet	catch somebody red-	go as red as a beetroot
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	treatment	handed	
be in the red	a red herring	on red alert	a red-head
red tape	see red	red meat	paint the town red

RED – key

a very important and significant day	be treated like a VIP	catch somebody in the act of doing something wrong	blush with embarrassment
to be in debt, show a deficit	something that leads one away from the main point	be ready for an emergency or attack	somebody with reddish or ginger hair
bureaucratic delay and form-filling	become very angry	beef, lamb, venison	celebrate wildly and drunkenly

BLACK – examples

the black sheep of the family	give somebody a black look	see things in black and white	have or want something in black and white
be in the black	black ice	the black market	have a blackout(1)
blacklist somebody	a black day	blackmail	have a blackout (2)
look on the black side	black humor	the black economy	have a blackout (3)

BLACK – key

somebody who is strongly disapproved of by others	look at somebody angrily or in a hostile way	consider things as either good or bad , right or wrong	want something to be written down or in print
have money in the bank, show a profit	transparent ice on a pavement or road	buying or selling things illegally	faint or lose consciousness
put somebody on a list of unacceptable people	a day when things have gone badly wrong	demanding money in return for not revealing something secret or compromising	temporary loss of memory (e.g. your phone number)

be pessimistic or gloomy	joking about sad or tragic things	unofficial business, paying no tax, etc	a power cut
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WHITE – examples

a white Christmas	a white-collar worker	be whiter than white	be or go as white as a sheet
a white lie	a white elephant	a white wedding	white meat
whitewash(1)	whitewash(2)	white goods	white coffee

WHITE – key

a snowy Christmas	an office worker	be perfect and free of blame or fault	be very frightened
a harmless or small lie, often told so as not hurt someone's feelings	something very expensive, but useless	a traditional wedding when the bride wears a white dress	chicken, turkey
deliberately hide faults or mistakes	win a sporting event without the opponent scoring a point	electrical household appliances like freezers, washing machines	coffee with milk or cream added

BLUE – examples

to have the blues	to turn blue in the face	to drink till all is blue	to turn the air blue
out of the blue	things look blue	at the blue moon	to blue one's money
once in a blue moon	boys in blue	to beat black and blue	to be under the blue blanket

BLUE – key

to feel depressed, melancholic	to have a purple, earthy color of the face	to drink so much that you fall under the table	to use dirty language, to swear
suddenly, unexpectedly	the perspectives are gloomy	almost never	to spend someone's money on trivial things

rarely	policemen, sailors	to beat someone until he is full of bruises and wounds	to sleep outdoors, under the sky
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GREEN – examples

to get the green light	green politics	the grapes are too green	to be still in the green
to have green fingers	green with envy	to enjoy a green, old age	the long green
green belt area	green wound	to see any green in someone's eyes	a green winter

GREEN – key

to get approval to start something	environmental politics	looking down on something that is very hard to obtain	to be still young enough to do something
to be good at gardening	very envious of someone's success	to be still strong, though old	dollars, money
an area of protected land surrounding a town or city:	a wound that is still fresh, unhealed	to consider someone naive	a mild winter, without snow

After the students explained all the idioms they had received and read the sentences they made, I showed them the correct explanations to see if they matched. Then, each group had to choose an idiom from the ones given and write a mini-saga (60-70 words) inspired by it. They gave it a title and read it aloud in front of the other groups. The stories they made were quite interesting and funny and it took them almost 25 minutes to accomplish this task. I was surprised to see that some groups chose to use all idioms in one story and they proved to be very interesting and creative.

If the first tasks involved group work, the following ones focused on individual accomplishments, so that each student's assessment became easier for me.

The next activity I chose from the multitude of exercises meant to encourage creative writing was poem writing. The exercise is called "I Wonder who paints butterflies" and it

involves asking questions about the world. After a brief revision on relative clauses, students were given the following pattern:

			Example
I wonder	who	verb +noun	I wonder who painted butterflies I wonder who made the elephant's nose long
I wonder	why	noun + verb	I wonder why ladybirds have spots
	where	noun + verb	I wonder where the sun goes at night
	whether	noun + verb	I wonder whether fairies exist
	what	noun + verb	I wonder what lions do in winter
		verb+ noun	I wonder what happens to the moon during the day

The students were asked to give as many examples as they could for each pattern, then write a three stanza poem called “I Wonder”, which they had to read in front of the class after being corrected by the teacher.

As a third task, students were asked to imagine they were shipwrecked on a deserted island and they could send only one message in a bottle, either to their parents, or their best friend. The message should not have more than 70 words. The message should include useful information about the way they got there, a very short description of the place, expressing hope they would be rescued and brought home.

As the last task I chose a creative writing with photo inspiration. The objective was to encourage students to think and write creatively with inspiration from two photos. They were provided with two photos, a stopwatch, pencils and paper. Using the stopwatch I gave the students two minutes to study the photos. Then, they were asked to write a story, a poem, and a character analysis or to describe the pictures. I asked them to be creative and write about whatever comes to their mind after studying the photos. I gave them 10 minutes to free-write silently and when the time is up I asked some students to share what they have written. I emphasized that I was looking for creativity, not for perfection.

STUDENTS' PRODUCTS ANALYSIS

I used the activities described above with the whole class. From the many types of creative writing activities I chose these four because I considered them appropriate for them, knowing their level of English and some of their interests.

For the first task I chose a group activity to test students' ability to work in group, to take decisions and to encourage the competition spirit. I asked them to give definitions to different color idioms and to prove they have understood their meaning by making interesting sentences with them. Then, the second task was to create a short story, a mini-saga, based on one idiom from the set they had received. They had lots of ideas for the story and the hardest thing for them was to choose the most exciting one. In the end, the one who has the lowest participation in making the story was chosen by the group to read it aloud in front of the others. The colour idioms each group chose for their story were: "to have green fingers", "to tell a white lie", "out of the blue", "to paint the town red" and "to blackmail". They had almost no difficulty in explaining the idioms, the only ones they did not quite understand being "the long green" and "to be in the black".

The thing that I noticed when listening to their stories was that they even used other color idioms that I had not given them beforehand. The "Red Team's" story is provided below:

"One Christmas, I'd been with my brother and sister at this really boring family reunion where we had all our relatives dine with us, while constantly making attempts at small-talk. It all went just the same until around eleven, when I received a phone call from our friend: 'Louis, come out quick! I have tickets to this year's Christmas Funfair! Let's paint the town red!' So I made up an excuse and went away to have fun."

Another thing worth mentioning is that their stories were rather personal ones, the main characters of their stories being themselves, fact which demonstrates their direct involvement in this type of exercise. Here is the story written by the "Blue Team":

"While I was checking my Instagram account, an e-mail came today totally out of the blue, from a lawyer who said that an aunt I hadn't heard from in years had died and left me a million dollars, her house and everything she had. But then my mother wake me up...everything was just a dream."

The "Green Team" also wrote about personal experience:

"During my entire life I admired a lovely plant my grandma kept close to the kitchen's window. It was a lovely, tall plant with green leaves and a white flower. I had always tried to

take a branch of it and plant it into a flower-pot, but that was always unsuccessful. One day, my mother decided to try that by herself. To my amazement, it grew strongly and now I have an awesome flower, too. My mother really has green fingers!”

The stories the students wrote proved they understood perfectly the meaning of the idioms and it took them only a few minutes to think of a way to illustrate their use.

The next tasks were not a group work anymore; they were individual and were meant to measure each student’s creativity when asked to create a piece of writing – poem or message.

Students were given certain patterns to complete and form short poems, using relative clauses: I wonder who...../ I wonder why..... /I wonder when..... / I wonder whether...

They used vocabulary that included animals, fruit, vegetables, flowers, seasons and not only. They created very interesting questions which proved that fact that they all have an inquisitive mind, a lot of imagination and a lot of questions without answers. Some examples are provided below:

“I wonder who painted spots on ladybirds
I wonder what polar bears do in summer
I wonder who chose the colour of the flowers
I wonder why honey is sweet
I wonder whether the sea gets tired
I wonder why tigers have stripes.”

Other students wrote questions about their future:

“I wonder where I’ll be in 20 years
I wonder whether my Math teacher is going to give us a test today
I wonder what I will receive for Christmas
I wonder why my desk mate doesn’t like me.”

After they wrote many sentences, they chose a few in order to create poems. Some of the poems were really interesting and quite poetic:

“I wonder why clouds float
I wonder why water moves
I wonder why trees live for so long
I wonder why people need sleep.”

“I wonder who lives

In the sky
Way up high
Above the clouds.
I wonder what
They have for dinner
And what their garden
Looks like.
I truly wonder
Who lives in the sky
Way above the clouds
Into endless blue space beyond which I cannot see.
I wonder what makes her sad
And why she cries
This rain that
Comes from the sky.”

I can say that this task was carried out with a lot of pleasure and interest, as it was not a typical grammar practice exercise that English teachers tend to bombard their students with. It focused on imagination and creativity and gave them much freedom of choice.

The next task was also an individual one, as they had to send a message in the bottle to their parents or friends, from a faraway island. They had to be precise and write no more than 50 words in which to express their current situation on the island, as well as the circumstances in which they came to be shipwrecked there. The students also took different roles, such as a pirate, a captain, a princess, or even a nobleman or a cat. They did not focus much on the grammar rules, but gave a great importance to the ideas they had to convey. Some of them wrote the message as a telegram, with very short sentences and others wrote complex messages like the following examples:

“To whoever reads this message:

I am Princess Lucy from The White Kingdom and on my coronation day I was kidnapped by some awful pirates. They took me on their boat and on our way we were caught in a horrible storm. The boat sank. I barely managed to swim to this island... I'm very worried about my

family and my kingdom. If this message reaches the kingdom I promise to reward the person with anything they want.”

“Dear Reader,

Please help me! I am on a deserted island. The island’s name is Punk Hazard. Please send help! I was with my crew, trying to find a friend of ours who was captured by some evil pirates. But suddenly, a storm started. It was awful. My crew and I tried everything we could to resist the storm but because of the insane climate of the island on which I am right now, there was nothing we could do. Because of the powerful wind our ship got too close to the island and hit something. Then it sank. I don’t remember much from there on. Do not worry. I am not a pirate. I just need help so that I can continue my search for my friend!

Please send help.

Sincerely,

Lena.”

The last creative writing was, as I already mentioned earlier, a photo description. Many of them gave only a description of the two people shown in the photos:

“In the first picture there is a man with long ginger hair. He has blue eyes and he has a serious face (and I think he hides something...). His hair is straight and curly only on top. He wears a light brown shirt and a white scarf tied around his neck. He might be an actor who’s getting ready to go up on stage. In the second picture I see a woman. She has her hair up in a strange shape with gold accessories and covered by a white cloth. She has a serious face but I think she is pleased with her life and with what she does. She has blue eyes and red lips and is wearing a red dress which is probably long. To me, she looks like one of those women who used to take care of the royal people.”

One student chose to make a story based on a dialogue between the two characters given. He proved himself the most creative one at this last task:

“- No, sir Gandwire, I cannot afford to pay for another expensive all-exquisite ball for you and your entourage. In this manner, we would exhaust the kingdom’s treasury in but a year, said the Queen with slight disapproval.

- Oh, ‘tis but a formality rather than an act of choice. You see, your Majesty, good old Duke Irwin is to settle down soon. This calls for celebration! Shall we not prove ourselves up to

the expectancies of so many good noblemen and women and so openly refuse to set up such a festive event as caused by fear of monetary shortage?

- Sir, if we arrange a ball by the day to honor our nobles, we would still shortly run dry! I refuse to aid you in this endeavor with sincere hope that you understand.

- Yes, indeed, your Honor. Please excuse my obstinate insistence.

- Farewell, sir Gandwire.”

What I could notice during these classes was the active participation of all students, a high interest from all of them in the proposed topics. It proved to be a very pleasant and enjoyable activity, in contrast with other classes taught before.

So, I reached the conclusion that creative writing activities keep students active and make classes enjoyable and pleasant. I analyzed their products in order to see how creative they were. I wanted to see if they provided me other examples than those heard in the class or those given by me. I was surprised to discover how creative and innovative the students could be and how correct and interesting their writings were.

CONCLUSIONS

The creative writing approach involves the teacher providing a stimulus, such as a piece of music or visual art, which is followed by an immediate response. This often results in brief personal forms of writing such as a short descriptive sketch, a poem or a message. The positive features of this are the emphasis on creativity and an early attempt to link writing with the arts. However, one of the problems is the fact that all the students still have to complete the teacher-designed task. The use of a stimulus for a group is often very successful, but students need to find the kinds of stimuli that personally motivate them to write. In this case, my students suggested having a further project on colours. The Blue team wore only blue clothes and wrote about blue things: water, air, ink, etc. So did the other groups and an interesting follow-up activity took place the following class. The Red group even baked some red muffins and the green group brought some green beverages. They took many photos and created an album and they were very proud of it. I consider this is one type of activity students prefer because they have the opportunity to choose from the wide variety of exercises the ones in which they can best express their feelings and creativity, combining language learning with their hobbies: painting, singing, acting, even cooking.

To sum up, I could say that, during the classes I taught I reached several conclusions: creative writing is suitable to all age categories, as all students enjoy when their teachers use creative writing in the classes. I can state that all students would like their teachers to use more creative activities in the classroom because using creative activities is important in building a good relationship between students and teachers.

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