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# Teaching ESL Through Creative Writing

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Teaching ESL Through Creative Writing

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B.A., University of California, Berkeley 1978

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for the Master of Arts in Teaching degree at the School  
for International Training, Brattleboro, Vermont.

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This project by Nancy Husari is accepted in its present form.

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## INTRODUCTION

In reading and thinking about the process that a native speaker goes through in learning how to write "creatively," I've seen what I think are a lot of similarities between learning a second language and teaching oneself to comfortably, articulately and expressively communicate in writing in one's own language. Many people have a psychological block against writing in their own language and many people have a psychological block against learning other languages. Some questions that have arisen for me are: Can both skills be approached at once? Can they complement each other when approached simultaneously? What kinds of complications will arise?

The purpose of this paper is to discuss these and other questions, based on a creative writing course that I taught in the ESL summer intensive program at Phillips Academy. In the first part of this paper I will describe briefly what I did, who the students were, and I will provide a brief rationale for why I decided to do this project. I have also included a more detailed description of the syllabus and the individual activities that I did. In the second part of the paper I have included general questions, concerns, and suggestions for using the syllabus, as well as some of the broader questions

that the course left me with. I have also drawn upon student responses to individual interviews that I did with them regarding the course and the idea of creative writing vis à vis learning English.

The final part of this paper is comprised of some suggestions and guidelines for further activities in this and related areas.

## I. DEFINITION, RATIONALE, SYLLABUS

### A. Creative Writing: A Definition

Before I begin to write about writing, I think that it is necessary to make some kind of distinction as to what creative writing is, as opposed to other kinds of writing, particularly as these two areas relate to the teaching of ESL. The first question that I asked in the final student interviews was "What is creative writing as opposed to regular writing?". The general consensus of the students on this issue seemed to be that creative writing has a lot to do with imagination and a different way of thinking, "writing without thinking," "writing the first thing that comes to your mind," "writing while thinking in a different way," and "You use imagination. Any writing is creative."

From what I've read of those in the field who have written about the issue of defining "creative writing" as opposed to other types of writing, the general

consensus seems to be that there are two (or more) ways to approach teaching writing to ESL students and that these approaches involve varying degrees of "creativity." One of the issues that came up in the readings that I did was that of "quantity vs. quality." "Quality," in this context, encompasses the more controlled writing exercises: giving students highly structured tasks to work on specific grammatical points, structures and patterns, the goal being writing correctly before writing creatively. "Quantity" refers to the area of free composition: giving students numerous writing tasks that will allow as much self-expression as possible, with minimal restraints (such as grammar and structure) put on this self-expression.

I'm sure that very few people would disagree with the fact that creativity can be a part of most "controlled" writing assignments, and that grammatical corrections can also be done with free composition exercises. I think that creative writing involves working with both controlled and uncontrolled writing assignments, though I think that quantity plays a large role in making students comfortable enough with writing to write naturally and creatively. I view creative writing as an art form and a craft which, like any other art form or craft, involves a great deal of discipline (such as that found in controlled compositions), but it also involves self-expression: there must be a direct connection between

the writer (in this case the student) and the subject matter. Quantity is one way to tap self-expression. Through writing in quantity, writing becomes a habit. It therefore becomes a more natural vehicle for self-expression. I also believe that language learning is a creative process and, for this reason, using creative writing to teach language can have specific linguistic benefits. Using an art form (creative writing) to teach language can help the student develop a sense for the creative aspects of the language.

There are, however, valid reasons for defining types of writing in teaching ESL. And, these are questions that still remain for me: When is the ESL student ready for creative writing? Can it be harmful if attempted too early? Is it for everyone? I think that the students that I worked with were ready for creative writing, but what about other students, particularly at lower levels?

Vivian Zamil in "Teaching Composition in the ESL Classroom: What We Can Learn From Research in the Teaching of English," shows us a generally accepted model for the stages of teaching writing to ESL students. This model goes from total control (substitution, manipulation, and transformation of sentences and patterns) through an increase in complexity (imitation and differentiation of stylistic patterns) to free composition (frequent,



uncontrolled writing practice).<sup>1</sup> She also cites the presence of two groups in the field: one that warns of the "danger of asking students to write too expressively too early,"<sup>2</sup> and another group that claims that "quantity without control is necessary for learning writing."<sup>3</sup> The question of teaching students to write in stages is a rather broad one, although I think that certain types of creative writing exercises are definitely more appropriate for lower levels than others. I have not had experience in teaching creative writing to lower levels, but I have included some ideas for exercises that might be appropriate for lower levels in the last section of this paper: Suggestions for Further Activities.

The question of quality vs. quantity is also still an unresolved issue for me. I think that it would be most useful for me to address this specific issue in greater detail later in this paper, after I present descriptions of some of the activities that I did in the course.

1. Vivian Zamil, "Teaching Composition in the ESL Classroom; What We Can Learn From Research in the Teaching of English," TESOL Quarterly X, No. 1 (March, 1976), 70

2. Zamil, op. cit., 69

3. Zamil, op. cit., 70

### B. Creative Writing for ESL Students: The General Value of What Can Be Done

In keeping some of the variables that I mentioned above in mind, one of the most important things that I've learned about teaching creative writing to ESL students is that it is necessary to have a rather wide definition of what creative writing is. This idea is in keeping with one of the goals for this course that I wrote prior to teaching it. I stated that I wanted to see "how creative writing, as a specific medium, can be useful in teaching a second language." In this perspective, it is necessary to establish the fact that the primary goal of the course is to teach ESL through creative writing, and to be flexible enough to stray into other areas, besides creative writing, in the interest of language learning. A big advantage in this perspective is that most of the ideas, insights, and activities that I've collected could easily be incorporated into any type of ESL class, as supplementary material, and they could easily be adapted for use at other levels.

### C. The Syllabus and the Students: A Brief Description

The ESL program at Phillips Academy (where this course was taught) consists of two mandatory major courses (grammar and conversation) and at least one mandatory minor course. The minor courses were to be designed to work on specific aspects of the language. I decided on Creative Writing as my minor course. Examples of other courses that fell

into this category were Playreading, Research Paper Writing and Interviewing.

In designing the course, prior to meeting the students, I set up a rough six week syllabus, based on an idea of how I would set up a creative writing course for native speakers, with the stipulation that I would adapt it, as I went along, to the needs of ESL students. This would involve a series of writing exercises to be done in and outside of class. We would also do an analysis/critiquing exercises on a short story, to familiarize the students with the critiquing process; then they would be able to critique each others' work daily. I also knew that I wanted to try doing an ESL newspaper, based on many of the principles of language experience techniques. I left the last two weeks of the course open, depending on whether the students wanted to continue working on projects started in either of the first two parts of the course.

The group of students that signed up for the course seemed to be ideal for this type of project, on one level. They were all upper level ESL high school students; vocabulary was not a big problem. They had had exposure to literature; some had done creative writing or newspaper writing in their own languages. I had a teaching assistant and a small group of students (9), so the student/teacher ratio was excellent. But other factors arose that I had

not considered. There was a wide range of levels, interests, and personalities in the class. Several of the students had signed up for the course by default--that is they had to take a minor course in ESL and they didn't want to take the other courses offered. Most took the creative writing course out of curiosity and to improve their English writing skills in general, although some did have some interest in creative writing specifically. One of the students had a specific interest in poetry, and he was also very near fluency in English. Several said that they hated poetry. A few had done some newspaper writing in their native languages.

D. The Syllabus: Daily Lesson Plans, Description of Activities

Day 1 I. Introduction to Class

Description of class as explained in Section C. above.

II. Paired Introductions

Students interview and are interviewed by a partner for ten minutes. Afterwards, they "present" their partner to the rest of the class, based on questions asked in the interview: general biography, interests, reasons for studying English, creative writing, etc.

III. Characters in Search of An Author

Each student chooses a picture from a variety of pictures of people. Assignment: Write a biography of this person based on the picture. Possible guidelines for questions:

1. What has happened to this person in a) the recent past b) his entire life?

- 2. Where is this person? Why is this person where he is?
- 3. Does this person have a problem or something significant happening in his life at this point in time (in the picture)?
- 4. What is this person's future?

Day 2

I. Automatic Writing Exercise

Students write for 10 minutes without stopping. After 10 minutes, they stop, look at what they have written for five minutes, mentally reorganize what they have written/want to write (without writing), then they rewrite the same thing for an additional ten minutes.

II. In-Class Composition

This exercise was based on a Values Clarification Seminar that I required them to attend for homework. The seminar was an exercise on choosing survivors of a nuclear holocaust, based on given information. Assignment: Write about a "crisis" in your life: a time when you had to make a difficult decision.

Day 3

I. Discussion of The Old Man and the Sea

Discuss difficult vocabulary in groups with teacher(s) circulating to help. Discussion of style (see p.28 of this paper under Teaching Literature for details of this procedure).

II. In-Class Composition

Based on the isolation of techniques that Hemingway used in this excerpt. Assignment: Write a composition that utilizes the three techniques found in the Hemingway excerpt:

- 1. Description of a character
- 2. Dialogue
- 3. Description of an environment

Day 4 I. Synonym/Antonym Game

Class divides into two teams; teacher has a set list of words that have precise synonyms and antonyms. Teams have to give a synonym or antonym, similarly to a spelling bee.

II. In-Class Composition

The entire class thinks of one line with a comparison in it. Assignment: Class members write individual compositions based on this line.

Day 5 I. Discussion of the poem "Ma Provence" which is written half in English, half in French (See p.27 of this paper under Teaching Literature for details of procedure)

II. Discussion of the use of two languages in one poem. Discussion of the expression of culture through language.

III. Critique of Student Work

I typed up a piece of writing that a student had done a finished draft of, and distributed copies to all class members. Assignment: Read the piece carefully and choose one or two sentences that you like about the piece and say why you like it.

Day 6 I. Critique of Student Work

II. In-Class Composition

Write about your favorite writer in your own language and your favorite writer in English (preferably American) and be able to say why.

III. Begin analysis/discussion of Hemingway's short story Hills Like White Elephants (assigned for homework)

Day 7 I. Continue discussion of short story

II. In-Class Composition

Write a description of a famous person or someone that everyone in the class would know. Students read individual compositions and others guess who it is.

III. Critique of Student Work

Day 8

I. Art Gallery Expedition

I took students to the Campus Art Gallery. Assignment: Choose a picture and write something about it.

For students who need more structure, try questions used with Characters in Search of An Author Exercise (See Day 1)

II. Critique of Student Work

Day 9

I. Discussion of two poems

II. Automatic Writing Exercise

III. Critique of Student Work

LONGTERM WRITING ASSIGNMENT DURING THIS SECTION: Choose an interesting, well-populated place and sit in it for at least ten minutes each day and record your observations.

NEWSWRITING

The goal of this part of the course (2 weeks) was to come up with a newspaper put out by students.

Day 10

I. Introduction of Idea of Newspaper Writing/ General Discussion

II. Discussion of Expository Writing. Students talk about their idea of how to write from an outline, and persuasive writing. The purpose of this exercise was to give students a point of comparison for writing news stories.

III. In-Class Composition

Persuasive Composition from Outline

IV. Critique of Student Work

Day 11

I. In two groups, the class takes newspapers apart. Discuss the different kinds of articles found in a newspaper.

II. Lecture: News Stories vs. Feature Stories (Hard News vs. Soft News)

III. Division of Assignments for Student Newspaper (Topics were decided on by the people writing

them, except Ms. 001, which was my suggestion.)

1. "Preppies at Andover"
2. "Dear Ms. 001"  
I asked other teachers to assign students in their classes to write to Ms. 001 for advice and place letters anonymously in a box where my students could find them.
3. "Americans and Students at Andover From a Foreigner's Point of View"  
Two students wrote up a questionnaire to give to all ESL students at Andover about their views of the U.S.. Article was written partially from information from these questionnaires.
4. "Food in the Cafeteria"  
Also done from a questionnaire
5. "Social Events at Andover"

IV. General Assignment: Watch Miss Universe. Write up a story on who won, who you think should have won and why.

Day 12

- I. Lecture: How to Write a News Story  
Points to make in teaching about writing hard news: No introduction, body and conclusion model; most exciting, interesting facts first: who, what, when, where, how, etc.; less exciting facts presented in order of potential for grabbing readers' attention; the model of the inverted pyramid in newswriting; no set conclusion

Day 13

- I. Analysis/Discussion of Human Interest Story
- II. In-Class Composition  
Interview another person in the class; write up a human interest story about them.
- III. Homework: Rewrite a fairy tale as a news story.

Day 14

- I. Discussion of homework assignment  
As students had trouble reconstructing stories



outside of class, we rewrote the story on the blackboard as a group effort, in journalese.

- Days 15, 16      Independent work in class on articles for newspaper
- Day 17      I. Analysis of poem: Sylvia Plath
- II. In-class Composition
- Write a description of what you consider to be a poetic place.
- III. Spelling Bee (See p.34 in Shorter Game-like Activities)
- IV. Homework: Read Dancing the Jig (short story)
- 

#### PLAYWRITING

- Day 18      I. Discussion/Analysis of Dancing the Jig
- II. Introduction to Playwriting:
- I divided the class into groups of three to write plays to be performed at the end of the week.
- Day 19      I. Automatic Writing Exercise in Cemetery
- Find a gravestone that you like and do an automatic writing exercise based on the person who is buried there.
- II. Independent work on plays in class
- Day 20      Independent work on plays in class
- Day 21      I. Perform plays
- II. Spelling Bee
- III. Critique of Student Work
- IV. Group Poem:
- One student writes two lines of a poem and hands it to the next person to write the next two lines; the person writing can only look at the previous two lines and no more. We had two poems circulating at one time

Day 22

- I. Field trip to printing press

Day 23

- I. Final: Write a story or essay (45 minutes) on one of the following topics:

1. A childhood memory
2. A cross cultural misunderstanding at Andover

Write this piece using:

1. Description of a character
2. Dialogue
3. Description of an environment

## II. GENERAL QUESTIONS, CONCERNS, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR USING THE SYLLABUS

### A. Use of Class Time

A large area of concern for any class is use of class time. I think that for a creative writing class it is very important to write in class every day. Admittedly, my expectations were high in this area in the beginning. In the first class, I expected students to write for one hour on one project; this was clearly too long. Six hours a week is a lot of writing time for native speakers and it requires a tremendous amount of focused energy from ESL students. A marked change in focus in each lesson and the marked change in the syllabus every two weeks was very important. Nevertheless, I look upon the writing done in class as a focal point of the course.

For one thing, many of the students were being exposed to completely new forms and styles of writing for the first time. Doing exercises in which the students may not know exactly what is expected of them can be much more effective if done in class where the teacher can answer any questions that come up.

Also, many of the non-writing activities that we did in class (critiquing and discussion of literature, etc.) were related to the writing assignments that I asked the students to do. For this reason, the writing assignments

were often most effective when done shortly before or shortly class discussions, i.e., in class.

B. Academic Culture Shock/Resistance

I don't know how many times in my ESL career I will have the opportunity to teach a specific course called "Creative Writing for ESL Students"; even if this situation were to present itself again, I think that the majority of the students would be in the course for the same reason that most of my students were: to improve their general writing ability in English. Many ESL students, as I mentioned in the previous section, have had no contact with the format and structure (or lack thereof) that characterizes what many Americans have experienced in creative writing courses in high school or college. In other words, I found that many of the kinds of activities and exercises that I did in this course initially created a kind of academic culture shock in my students. It depends on the individual teacher and students regarding how academic culture shock and resistance to creative writing activities should be handled. In this particular class, "academic culture shock" manifested itself in the form of a lot of resistance and complaints in the beginning that I was able to overcome (or at least deal with) by increasing the variety of activities in each lesson and in the course in general. I also found that

once the students became accustomed to the types of activities we were doing, they were able to see some purpose in it. We had a few discussions about the purposes of the activities, which were also helpful. Sometime during the second week, most of them were able to stop complaining and start concentrating on and enjoying what we were doing.

Some of the reasons that this class "worked" were a) class size (nine students) and b) the fact that there were two teachers (a teaching assistant and myself). Also the students were well-traveled, well-educated, and almost all were at least curious about creative writing from the beginning, which contributed to their receptivity.

I had one student for whom the class really didn't work. He said, in the final interview, that he got nothing out of the class and that he would have preferred a more "serious" class--one in which we did more reading and less writing. These alterations would have essentially changed the class from a creative writing class to a literature class.

Valid considerations in setting up a creative writing class or creative writing activities for ESL students are a) What about large classes? b) Would the exercises that I did work as well with only one teacher circulating? c) What about students who are un-

receptive to the point where they really would get nothing out of the course?

Although there probably are situations where the idea of creative writing simply is not feasible, I think that there are certain concrete steps that can be taken to deal with the problem of resistance to individual activities. Below are some relatively simple alterations that worked for me:

1. Shorten the writing assignment.
2. Do something with the writing assignment in class right after doing the writing (discussions of the writing, etc.). This adds incentive and a sense of immediate purpose to the assignment.
3. Experiment with students working in groups:
  - a) Break up cliques (and/or language groups) and assign certain people to work together, rather than have them form their own groups, if some students have a tendency to distract one another.
  - b) Notice which students work well together and which students work well without supervision; make sure that students in the latter category are distributed throughout various groups; experiment with asking students to help each other.
4. Demand a lot from the students. My students enjoyed the challenge and, in being challenged, they could see that lack of traditional structure does not mean lack of disciplined work.
5. Don't give up immediately if the students are restless with a particular assignment. Some of our most productive assignments required a lot of energy on the teachers' part simply to maintain order. As a teacher, you have to think about how much of this kind of energy (disciplining students, explaining the validity

of certain assignments) you have to give, and plan your daily lessons accordingly. But in general, I found it to be worth the effort to push the students and myself to try new things.

I said before that I doubt if I'll have many classes that are set up for the specific purpose of teaching creative writing to ESL students. Within the context of another class, you would have the freedom to incorporate or not to incorporate creative writing assignments into a larger framework.

I was lucky with my class; eight out of nine students said they got a lot out of the class and the improvement that I saw in their writing bore this out. Conceivably, it could have been eight out of nine who got nothing out of it, simply because they wanted and needed more controlled composition assignments. If this really were the case, I would drop the creative writing assignments, just as I would drop any activity that I didn't think was worth the effort necessary to convince the students of its validity. There are alternatives, such as teaching literature or expository writing. Not everyone wants to do creative writing and it is important to be prepared for this situation and to respect the needs of the students for whom creative writing is an unproductive way of learning the language.

### C. Automatic Writing Exercises

An example of an exercise in which student receptivity and attitude changed a lot during the course was the automatic writing exercise. I adapted the procedure for these exercises from the ten minute writing exercise in Peter Elbow's Writing Without Teachers. I included the basic rules of this exercise in the syllabus: ten minutes of writing without stopping, five minutes of editing without writing, and another ten minutes of writing without stopping. The rules of the exercise are that the students cannot, under any circumstances, stop writing during the ten minute blocks, and the students cannot write at all during the five minute interval. The editing/reorganizing process is to be done completely without the aid of any writing instrument. The students are not to cross anything out, or to worry about punctuation or spelling because I want them to work only with ideas. In doing the exercise, if they got stuck, I told them to simply write the same word or sentence over and over again until something else came out of their pens. The point of the exercise is that the students use their pens--the writing process--to generate new ideas and not get involved in a period of thinking, editing and translating.

The first time that I tried the automatic writing



exercise the students hated it. They complained throughout the whole exercise and questioned its validity. I had them continue to do the exercises, in spite of complaints, and afterwards we had a discussion about why I would ask them to write that way. We talked about previous writing instruction they'd had, in their native languages. All previous writing instruction had been in the introduction-body-conclusion model, with a heavy emphasis on outlining before writing. I explained to the students that I felt that there were a lot of valuable ideas that got edited out in that process and that although I would not advocate writing everything through automatic writing, I certainly see a value in it in terms of getting a lot of ideas onto paper that would otherwise be edited out. I took their compositions home and I was amazed at how much more natural and interesting their writing was in this exercise than in previous exercises. I told them that the next day. I was reluctant to try the exercise again, a week and a half later, but I did and the response was just the opposite. I didn't have to coax them at all. I did the exercise two more times during the course. In the final student interviews the automatic writing exercises were mentioned by almost all students as one of the activities that helped them to "think in English."

This exercise is an example of two of the points

that I mentioned above. The first is that perseverance, in this case, paid off. The second point is that this exercise, which both myself and the students found to be one of the most valuable parts of the course, had to be done in class or a) the students would not have done it properly and b) the students would not have learned to like it enough to do it at all.

#### D. Specific Linguistic Benefits

In terms of specific linguistic benefits, I think that creative writing can be particularly beneficial at more advanced levels in fine-tuning subtle understandings of the language. An example of this was Roger, the advanced student who wrote poetry. I would go over his poems with him and wherever I saw a line that was expressed in a way that a native speaker (American) would not naturally say it in speech, I would point it out to him, make sure that he understood the meaning of what he did write, what the alternatives are, and then give him the choice. Often, he'd leave it the way it was, but sometimes we would find some point that really was an "error." In any case, I think that there are many different levels of understanding in the meaning of any given word or expression. Working with poetry in this way helped Roger to gain greater control over all of the levels of meaning.

Following is an example of the kinds of things that

we discussed in working with Roger's poetry (see the following page for final copy of the poem with references to comments below):

1. I pointed out that the natural "native speaker" way to say this is "rain at night," that "rain in night" is grammatically incorrect, but that it creates an interesting poetic image, provided he understands what that image is and chooses to use it.
2. We talked about how he was using the word "winds." Apparently Roger thought that he was using the word as a verb with the intended meaning of:

God insane  
Blows winds on earth

I explained that we have no one-word verb that means "to blow wind" or "to cause wind to blow." "Wind" as a verb is pronounced (wīnd) and is used as in "to wind an alarm clock." But in this context, we could see "winds" being used as a noun, meaning "there are winds on earth."

3. The original line here was "a human's life." I explained that "a human life" is the most natural way of expressing this concept. (This was the only "error" that Roger chose to change.

The Revelation

Rain in night<sup>1</sup>  
Lights the skies  
Burning snows  
Bright and cold

In a cave  
Children smile  
Playing games  
Crocodiles

Fire in rain  
God insane  
Winds on earth<sup>2</sup>  
Insect birth

The snakes crawl  
In the dust  
And the birds fly  
In the sky

God whispers  
The thunder strikes  
Heard a cry  
Children die

Rings the bell  
Time to lie  
A human life<sup>3</sup>  
Ends by knife

Crying graves  
Of dying waves  
Rats and snakes  
Together smile

E. Error Correction/Self Critiquing

The above example can be looked upon as one form of error correction. What about other forms of error correction and self-critiquing for ESL students?

I mentioned previously that the standard way that I had of dealing with error correction was to ask for an initial piece of writing and to return the piece to the student with notations of grammatical errors, until the student had returned the piece to me with almost no errors.

Thomas Buckingham and William Peck (TESOL Quarterly 10:1, March, 1976) suggest presenting the students with a list of non-negotiable demands before you will accept a piece of writing (correct verb tense, word order, etc.)<sup>4</sup>

I also did peer-critiquing with my students. The way that I handled critiquing of student works was first, to have them rewrite some of their pieces until there were no grammatical errors. Then I would type up one or two pieces with no names attached and I would distribute copies to the class. Since it was a high school class (an age group not know for tact and diplomacy), I asked them to read the pieces and find

4. Buckingham, Thomas and Peck, William, "An Experience Approach to Teaching Composition," TESOL Quarterly X, No. 1 (March, 1976), 63

one or two lines that they liked for stylistic reasons and to be able to say why. Peter Elbow (Writing Without Teachers) suggests asking students to find one word (not necessarily in the piece of writing) that summarizes the piece of writing, or finding one line from the piece of writing that summarizes it. With other students, one might feel more comfortable in dealing with strengths and weaknesses of the piece.

Personally, with this particular group, I preferred to stress the positive and I essentially used the student critiquing sessions as a way of building confidence, which I think was effective.

#### F. Use of Models: Teaching Literature

In conjunction with peer-critiquing, I think that the use of models: literature analysis, is very valuable. It provides models and inspiration for the writing exercises. It adds variety to the class and it generally lends itself well to interesting class discussions, helping students to focus their attention. Most students said that they found the discussions of literature to be very stimulating. Below are examples of how we worked with one piece of prose and one piece of poetry in the class.

## a) Poetry

I chose this particular poem that was written in two languages to show that different languages can add to the contrast in feelings in different parts of the poem. I asked students to read the poem before coming to class.

Ma Provence

En ma provence le blé est toujours vert  
 Et les filles sont jolies  
 Elles ne meurent pas elles vous aiment à la folie  
 En ma provence

Bills break the breakfast teacups and the sun  
 Shines darkly over the bill-ware  
 She writes it out in enervating prose  
 "In my Provence, my rose"

Topics Covered in Class Discussion of the Poem

- I. Literal translation of the French by French-speaking students
- II. Line by line discussion of vocabulary in English
- III. Line by line analysis of the poem
  - A. Central focus: contrasts
    1. French vs. English  
 Does the verse in French have a different feeling to it than the verse in English?  
 Example: Are the images in the French part more romantic? In the English part more businesslike? (i.e. the use of bills--finances--in the second verse)
    2. Contrast in a single image:  
 "...the sun  
 Shines darkly..."

B. Is there any one word in the poem that can summarize the feeling(s) in the poem? Example: "Enervating" in the second verse. Is the second verse "enervating?" (discussion of definition)

1. What about the use of the quotation marks around the final line? Is that enervating? businesslike?

b) Prose

An example of a piece of prose that I worked on with students was the Old Man and the Sea. This particular lesson took me by surprise, but it turned out to be quite productive. I gave the students a very short excerpt from this book and I was expecting to spend a lot of time discussing vocabulary and meanings. The students had no problems with vocabulary and it soon became apparent that they were advanced enough to do something considerably more sophisticated than I had anticipated in terms of literary analysis. Being unprepared for this state of affairs, I decided to have us all look at the poem together. The basic outline of our discussion was as follows:

1. Do you like Hemingway's style?
2. If so, why (why not)?
3. Read the excerpt again and find one or two sentences that exemplify what you like/don't like about Hemingway's style. Be able to say why. Give examples.
4. Look at the excerpt again and be able to answer the following questions:
  - a) Does Hemingway use more than one technique: ex. dialogue, description, etc. in this excerpt?
  - b) If so, what techniques does he use? Give examples.



The answer to the last question was that he used a description of a character, a dialogue, and a description of an environment within this excerpt. This became the basis for our in-class composition: a composition that included all three of the above elements.

The above questions are examples of the kinds of questions that can be brought up in discussions of literature. I would offer one or two words of advice in using these types of questions, however.

I would probably not ask all of these questions in a discussion with students. I would use some of them (usually asked in an indirect way) to stimulate discussion. I usually found that when they got really interested in a discussion, the students came up with their own interpretations of the poem or short story that were very sensitive, thoughtful, and precise. These discussions often provided them with some ideas for discussing and evaluating their own and each others' work also.

It's important to give the students something to stimulate discussion, but not too much. I think that the key is to find something in the poem or short story that is narrow enough to offer structure and inspiration, but broad enough to be open to interpretation.

Also, as Kenneth Koch points out in his book on teaching poetry to children (Rose Where Did You Get That Red?), don't be afraid to tell the students when something in the poem or short story is not clear to you.<sup>5</sup> It's much more fun for them and for you if you all work on it together.

#### G. Newspaper Writing

The newspaper writing section that we did in the course is rather self-explanatory in the syllabus, but here I want to stress how valuable I think this part of the course was. The students really enjoyed working on a project together. The idea of "publication" added a lot of incentive for them to turn in quality material promptly and it gave the class a real feeling of working as a group. A second advantage of the newspaper writing section was that students were again introduced to a new style of writing: newswriting. To give students a point of reference again, I did an exercise in the model for expository essays: introduction-body-conclusion. I was very fortunate to have a teaching assistant who has had a lot of journalism experience, and she did a series of lectures on the model for writing news leads (the inverted pyramid, with the most important information first, no introduction, no conclusion) and the difference between news stories and feature stories.

5. Kenneth Koch, Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?, p.35

A third advantage of newspaper writing is that it allows students to work on a variety of topics; it is likely that everyone will find something that is of particular interest to him. Students who do not like to do newswriting per se can work on other forms of writing that can be included in the newspaper. For example, the poem that I discussed earlier in this paper was included in our newspaper because the student who wrote it was not interested in newswriting. Students who are interested in artwork can include drawings and help with layout.

One element of newspaper writing, which can be an advantage but also a liability in terms of discipline, is that newspaper writing requires independent work and self-discipline on the part of the students. I mentioned earlier that some of our most productive assignments required a lot of energy on the teacher's part simply to maintain order. Newspaper writing can get unruly, at least with high school students. I had students working together on assignments of their choice, with the people that they wanted to work with. Some groups worked well together and were self-motivated. This allowed me to circulate and work individually with the students to an extent that I had not been able to before. It was during these sessions that I was able to work with Roger extensively on his poetry. One group of students had trouble working without

supervision. For this reason, either my teaching assistant or myself had to work with this group almost constantly simply because someone would come to a stopping point before everyone else had finished, and we would have to decide if it was necessary to stop everyone in the class in the middle of their independent projects in order to do an activity that included everyone, for the sake of one or two students who had nothing to do.

One of the more general benefits of working on a newspaper is that it helps put students in touch with the community. We limited our articles to events and issues related to the campus, but a class could easily go into the surrounding community to find material. A particularly valuable activity that we did in this area was to have the students create their own questionnaires, distribute them, and write articles from the results.

I think that the idea of newspaper writing has a lot of potential for an entire course, utilizing commentaries, surveys, interviews, and movie reviews, to name a few possibilities. I have included in the last section ideas for community surveys, interviewing, and other suggestions for expanding this part of the course. This final section of this paper is entitled "Suggestions for Further Activities."

II. Other Activities: F

#### H. Other Activities: Playwriting and Shorter, Game-like Activities

Some of the areas that I did limited work in, I will simply designate here as areas with a lot of potential. I used them in conjunction with other areas that were of greater interest to me, such as newspaper writing. I used them for variety, but they could definitely be expanded a great deal.

One of these areas is playwriting. Our playwriting section actually covered only a week. I simply had students write plays in groups and perform them for each other, but there is certainly room to use this activity to work on specific areas of the language and to incorporate play-reading into the course as well.

Another set of activities with a lot of potential are shorter game-like activities. One of these activities that worked really well was the in-class composition in which everyone wrote a description of a famous person or someone that everyone in the class would know. Then students read their compositions in class and others guessed who the famous person was. Another group exercise that I did that worked well was the group poem. One student had to write two lines of a poem and hand it to the next person, who would write the next two lines (See syllabus for more explicit details). We had two poems circulating, although if I do the exercise again,

I will probably have more than two poems circulating at the same time. While the poems were circulating, I tried to include the entire class by asking for rhyming words for students who were "stuck" on one line. This part of the exercise could easily be expanded as a way of working on minimal pairs.

Another good vocabulary building exercise is the spelling bee. I divided the class into two teams and asked one person to spell a word. After the word was spelled correctly, I would ask for its meaning, a synonym, an antonym, the spelling of the antonym, etc.

#### I. Some Broader Questions

1. Quantity vs. Quality in Teaching Writing
2. Is Language a Barrier in Creative Writing?

In using any of the activities that I've described above, certain larger questions are present. Two issues that I am particularly interested in are a) what is the relationship between quantity and quality in teaching writing?, and b) is language a barrier in creative writing?

I am interested in the relationship of quantity and quality in teaching writing because, as I mentioned earlier, I experimented a lot with having students write in quantity. One definition of quantity that I mentioned before was that it refers to free compositions with minimal restraints put on self-expression. Quantity,

in my class, meant asking students to write for a certain period of time every day, both in and outside of class, in both structured and unstructured exercises. The point of quantity is that it makes writing a habit, not a highly abstract, difficult process that only native speakers or bonafide "authors" do.

But although I asked for quantity, I see no reason why quantity and quality cannot be approached simultaneously. In fact, I see problems in approaching either in isolation. I asked different things of my students in each of the exercises that we did. In automatic writing, I asked for their ideas only; in their compositions, I asked for ideas initially, but I usually returned the compositions to the students and asked for the correction of grammatical errors until the composition had no errors. Certain types of structured compositions automatically provide a sort of controlled framework in which students are forced to use certain linguistic patterns correctly. An example of this was the exercise in which I asked students to write a short piece which included a description of a character, a dialogue, and a description of an environment. Writing a natural-sounding dialogue and changing from description to dialogue in a natural way

is a very sophisticated skill, even for a native speaker. But writing, like many skills, is only as difficult as it is perceived to be by the writer. Learning to write is definitely difficult and requires a lot of work, but it is an approachable task, and students must believe this before they can start working on their writing. This is one reason why I see that spending too much time on highly controlled forms of writing exclusively without letting students sit down and write something that means something to them personally, is just as dangerous as "allowing students to write too expressively too early." Too many highly controlled exercises that do not draw upon the creativity of the student, can make writing unapproachable. The student will never learn to write correctly or naturally until the act of picking up a pen and filling a piece of paper with words is seen as an approachable task.

This is the first step in teaching creative writing: to get the students to lose their fear of writing. They must produce something, anything. If the piece of writing is something that the student has a personal stake in (a work of self-expression), this will aid in the process. This is one of the elements necessary in taking that first step. Another element is stamina.



The student, once he has built up the stamina and broken down at least part of the psychological barrier of writing and/or using a second language, is now freer to work on improving quality.

The danger in having the student write in quantity comes if the work stops here. Producing some writing that the student has a personal interest in is only the first of several steps in the process of creative writing. The process cannot continue without the first step, but the real work only begins here. Quantity provides rough material to work with. And this is where error correction comes in. Different kinds of error correction in creative writing is still a big question for me. I have already discussed some of the types of error correction that I did and some of the possibilities that I've not yet tried. I really don't know exactly what exercises or forms of error correction helped the students the most, but I do know that I saw a marked improvement in the quality of student writing and in attitude towards the idea of creative writing. There were fewer grammatical errors and something else--a more natural use of the language.

This brings up another question on the final interviews that I did with students: "How much of

a barrier is the fact that English is a foreign language, in writing creatively?" Only one student said that writing creatively in a second language was significantly more difficult than in her own language. One student said that it had been a problem, but that exercises done in the course, particularly automatic writing exercises, helped. Several said that creative writing in English was hard, but that it was equally difficult in their native language(s). One student said that it was a problem in expository writing, but not in creative writing. Another said that she found it easier and more enjoyable to write in English than in Italian (her native language) because she felt that her writing in English was simpler. My most advanced student said that he thinks that foreigners can appreciate the subtleties of English more than native speakers of English, which can be an advantage in creative writing. My favorite answer was from a student from the Dominican Republic who said that there is no barrier and that "If you have inspiration, you can write in Chinese if you have to." She also said that these types of exercises helped her to "like English."

Personally, I think that language is a barrier up to a certain point. The student has to have some language before he can use it. But I don't think that it is as much of a barrier as many people think. I was surprised by the answers given to this question in the interviews, and I believe they were sincere. I should also add that these comments were made by students who changed their minds on this issue at some point during the course. One of the complaints made during the initial automatic writing exercise was that language is a barrier.

I think that it is possible that in expressing themselves in another language, some people can slip into a new role and be less self-conscious about their writing in the new language. Perhaps some feel less pressure to write perfectly in a new language, so they can write more freely in it. I would also like to reiterate the fact that I see language learning as a creative process, so I also see using a creative medium to aid in this process as a natural way to learn.

### III. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER ACTIVITIES

This part of the paper will be devoted to further activities in the area of creative writing: ideas for expanding parts of the course that I taught, ideas that I've read about or thought about but I've not yet tried myself, and ideas that other teachers have tried, that I think would be useful in this type of class. One of my concerns, in preparing a list of possible activities in creative writing is that other levels of proficiency be addressed besides the level that I taught (intermediate - advanced). With this in mind, I've included in this list the particular levels that I think these individual activities might be useful with.

#### I. Semi-Controlled Writing

I think that it is possible to use many of the same kinds of topics that can be used at more advanced levels, with lower levels; it just depends upon the number and kinds of questions that you ask ESL students to write about in approaching any given topic. With lower levels, it is important to ask specific questions and lots of them. David Blot and David Davidson's Put it in Writing contains many activities for semi-controlled writing. These

activities provide a lot of structure for students, within a creative context.

### POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES

#### A. LOWER LEVELS

Write about a person, providing a certain amount of given information such as:

- Date, place of birth
- Description of parents
- Description of neighborhood
- Early life, teenage years
- Problems, good luck<sup>6</sup>

#### B. LOWER LEVELS

Write a basic letter with basic facts. Teacher presents guidelines with specific questions to be answered in the letter, such as:

- Where are you living now?
- Are you working? What kind of work are you doing?<sup>7</sup>

### INTERMEDIATE-ADVANCED

The "letter" idea could be done with many variations. Peter Elbow's suggestion in Writing Without Teachers is to "write a letter of blame to one's parents."<sup>8</sup> Though this might not be the most culturally sensitive suggestion for foreign students, it does give one an idea of the possibilities. In any case, I see a lot of potential for exploiting letter-writing in the ESL creative writing context, since letters are, for many people, their only regular form of creative writing.

#### C. INTERMEDIATE-ADVANCED:

Rewrite stories from the point of view of another character.

6. David Blot and David Davidson, Put it in Writing, p.9
7. Blot and Davidson, p.12
8. Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers, p.81

D. ADVANCED

Write something in the voice (from the point of view) of someone that you know. <sup>9</sup>

E. ADVANCED

Describe a person, place, or incident from an unfamiliar angle; for example: describe a place as though you were blind; describe a person as though he were describing himself; describe an incident as though it never happened (as though you were only imagining it.).<sup>10</sup>

F. ADVANCED

Describe something while you are in a definite mood, or pretend that you are in a certain mood. Don't mention the mood you are writing in and let the readers (other students) guess what that mood is.<sup>11</sup>

G. ALL LEVELS

Story Completion.

Blot and Davidson, in the section on Story Completion in their book, have included a series of uncompleted stories. The students can:

- a) simply complete the story, and/or
- b) answer a series of questions presented by the teacher about the story.<sup>12</sup>

H. ALL LEVELS

Dialogues.

- a) Students are presented with a story involving two or more people, possibly with some kind of conflict between them. Write a dialogue between these people.<sup>13</sup>
- b) Students are presented with a dialogue. They change the dialogue into reported speech.

9. Ibid

10. Ibid

11. Ibid

12. Blot and Davidson, op. cit. p. 25

13. Blot and Davidson, p; 54

I. INTERMEDIATE-ADVANCED

Rewrite a story from a different point in time.

- a) Write about an incident (presented by teacher) as if you were being interviewed by a reporter right after it happened.
- b) Write about the same incident as if you were writing to a friend about it six months later.<sup>14</sup>

J. INTERMEDIATE-ADVANCED

Write about a person you dislike.

K. INTERMEDIATE-ADVANCED

Write about a person who has influenced your life.

L. INTERMEDIATE-ADVANCED

Autobiography

M. INTERMEDIATE-ADVANCED

A humorous or amusing incident.

II. Analyzing LiteratureA. ADVANCED

Written Exercises in Literature Analysis

1. Analyzing Characters--Questions to Ask
  - a) Do you know the character well enough to say something about him?
  - b) List struggles and conflicts.
  - c) Judge actions.
  - d) Identify a problem the character is facing.<sup>15</sup>
2. Analyzing Poetry--Steps for Students to Take
  - a) Read the poem to get a sense of its meaning
  - b) State the meaning in one sentence.
  - c) Look for specific words, lines, images, and expressions that help convey this meaning.
  - d) Select images (word pictures) to expand that meaning.
  - e) Refer to each image, quoting lines from the poem.<sup>16</sup>

14. Blot and Davidson, p. 26

15. Arthur Traiger and Leon Gersten, Solutions to Your Writing Problems, p. 53

16. Traiger and Gersten, p. 60

## B. Discussions of Literary Techniques

1. Discussions of differences between:
  - a) analogy--comparing attributes of an object or a person.
  - b) simile--comparing two unlike objects using "like" and "as."
  - c) metaphor--a figure of speech in which two unlike objects are compared without "like" or "as."
2. Possible writing exercises based on the above discussion.

## III. Language Experience

\* William Peck and Thomas ("An Experience Approach to Teaching Composition, TESOL X:1) have discussed the use of language experience as an intermediary stage between controlled composition and a more expressive stage of writing. They offer in their article a model for approaching language experience exercises:

### 1. Preparation--Questionnaire

Ask students a variety of questions (on questionnaire) to get an idea of the type of language experience that the students would be interested in. In the case of this study, most students were health professionals, so they visited a hospital.

### 2. Orientation

Pre-reading, vocabulary, discussion of what students will be doing.

### 3. Experience

Visit to hospital, interviews, etc.



#### 4. Oral Reconstruction

Teacher transcribes tape recording of students' oral reconstruction of the experience.

#### 5. Output

Class reviews transcript, putting ideas into grammatically correct sentences, then into paragraphs. This collective activity could also be done by each student separately.<sup>17</sup>

### IV. Community Surveys

The community survey can be viewed as an extension of the language experience activity. It can be used in conjunction with interviewing and newspaper writing and can be done with most levels. The advantage of doing community surveys are similar to those that I found with newspaper writing. These include: interacting with a variety of Americans of various ages and classes, entry into the community, and knowledge about specific American institutions and customs.

Similarly to language experience techniques mentioned above, the first step involves developing a series of questions about specific institutions (libraries, supermarkets, etc.) with the teacher.

17. Traiger and Gersten, op. cit. pp. 59-60

From here, students can turn to culture specific questions to ask interviewees (example: How does the interviewee feel about Country X?, etc.).

## V. Interviewing

All of these areas (language experience, community surveys, and newspaper writing) can be expanded through interviewing. Margaret Thomas, another teacher at Phillips Academy, taught an interviewing course in which students were taught the basics of interviewing. Interviewees were brought into the classroom to be interviewed by the entire class, after the class had done some role plays and interviews with each other. The course also included individual interviews in the community. Below are the questions and guidelines that she used in the course.

### I. PREPARING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

#### A. Guidelines

1. Don't ask questions that can be answered in some other way (sidestepping the questions)
2. Decide what's relevant and then ask only relevant questions.
3. Don't ask questions which are too big or too small.
4. Be careful with "personal" questions.
5. Three of the most useful questions:  
"Why do you feel/think...?"  
"What's your opinion of...?"  
"What advice would you give...?"

## II. STEPS IN PREPARING TO SPONSOR AN IN-CLASS INTERVIEW

- A. Ten days to one week before the interview:
  - 1. Contact the interviewee and set up an appointment to meet with them, so that you can get to know them and start preparing for the interview.
  - 2. At the appointed time, meet with the interviewee.
    - a. Get background information about the interviewee: Name, Occupation, Education, etc.
    - b. Discuss possible interview topics.
    - c. Remind interviewee of date and location of the interview.
- B. One week before the interview:
  - 1. Write fifteen to twenty questions.
  - 2. Submit questions to the teacher.
  - 3. Write a brief introduction with which you will begin the interview.
- C. On the day of the interview:
  - 1. Get to class as early as possible.
  - 2. Arrange the chairs, and be ready to greet the interviewee.
- D. Conducting the interview:
  - 1. Introduction.
  - 2. Ask questions. Be ready to abandon your prepared questions if necessary.
  - 3. Conduct a question/answer period when the other students have a chance to question the interviewee.
  - 4. Conclude the interview, thanking the interviewee.
- E. After the interview:
  - 1. Write and mail a thank-you letter to the interviewee one or two days after the interview. Submit a copy to the teacher.
  - 2. Write an evaluation of the interview: what did you do right? What could have been improved? Give the evaluation to the teacher.

### III. FOLLOW UP STEPS IN PREPARING A PRESENTATION OF AN OUT OF CLASS INTERVIEW

- A. Preparing to give a class presentation
    1. Re-organize notes taken in the interview in outline form.
    2. Add to the outline:
      - a. An introduction and conclusion.
      - b. One or more direct quotes.
      - c. Some details of how you arranged and conducted the interview: tell of any difficulties you experienced or any interesting events which occurred.
    3. Be ready to answer questions from the class about your interview.
    4. Divide your presentation with your partner so that both of you address the class.
  - B. After the presentation:
    1. Write a summary of the work you did.
      - a. What might have been done better?
      - b. Which parts were particularly successful?
    2. Submit the summary to the teacher.
- 

### VI. Book Production/Storywriting

The International Institute in Boston did a storywriting/book production project. This was done with adult immigrants who were lower level ESL students. The student projects included layout, design, bookbinding, and artwork. I saw the results, which were beautiful. Although many of the steps in book production (such as artwork) are not directly related to studying the written language, I feel that projects like this have many of the same advantages as newspaper writing. Students take a lot of pride in creating a finished project such as a book or newspaper and part of this

project is writing. The book making project, to me, is an example of how creativity and self-expression can be a part of even beginning writing exercises.

#### VII. Newspaper Writing (Other Possible Activities)

1. Editorials
2. Letters to the Editor
3. Movie Reviews: Possible Areas for Guidelines:
  - a) theme
  - b) conflict
  - c) characterization
  - d) dialogue
  - e) techniques
  - f) acting

These areas could also be useful in analyzing literature.

I think that movies could be a particularly good medium for ESL students to work with because reviewing movies requires taking mental notes (since the theatre is dark) and reconstructing these notes after the fact.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES: AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

50

Ford, Carol, and Silverman, Ann, American Cultural Encounters, Alemany Press  
Cultural topics for ESL conversation; topics could easily be adapted for writing exercises.

Leavitt, Hart Day, and Sohn, David A., Stop, Look and Write, Bantam  
Topics for creative writing. Many exercises use pictures. This is not an ESL book, but ideas could easily be adapted.

Martin, Nancy, D'Arcy, Pat, Newston, Bryan, and Parker, Robert, Writing and Learning Across the Curriculum 11-16, Schools Council  
This is a book on writing and learning in children. There are some interesting looking chapters on the mechanics of writing and learning to write.

Newson, Dr. Earl, The Newspaper, Spectrum  
A basic journalism textbook. This book contains everything necessary for setting up and running a newspaper. It is not an ESL textbook, but it would be invaluable in setting up ESL journalism assignments.

Raimes, Ann, Focus on Composition, Oxford  
Structured composition tasks for ESL students.

Ruehlmann, William, Stalking the Feature Story, Writer's Digest  
Another basic journalism textbook, containing information on writing feature stories. Again, it is not an ESL textbook, but ideas could be adapted.

SUMMARY

I've found creative writing to be a very useful tool for teaching language and that elements of it can be employed at very early stages in language learning. I have presented techniques and strategies that I have worked with and found useful in developing a variety of skills and awarenesses. I have tried to discuss some of the larger questions that will be raised whenever dealing with creative writing.

It's true that both learning English and learning creative writing are challenges in themselves, but in my work, I've found that creative writing can facilitate language learning. As I mentioned, many of my students said that it was not more difficult to write creatively in English than in their native language(s) and moreover, that writing creatively helped them to "like English," and to "think in English."

Creative writing is a very interesting aspect of language teaching, with much room for further research and expansion within the ESL classroom. In this paper, I have also mentioned several potential areas of activities in which I have done limited work or research (playwriting, for example). In addition, I have presented areas that could be expanded into entire courses (i.e. newspaper writing), and areas that I have only thought or read about (controlled compositions for

lower levels, for example). I would hope that those reading this paper who choose to make some practical use of it can find some direct usefulness in the syllabus and the descriptions of activities that I did. I would also hope that the reader will expand and alter these ideas and activities to fit the needs of a variety of situations, levels, teachers and students.



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