

MAKING FULL USE OF GRADED READERS TO FACILITATE EFL CREATIVE WRITING TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract

Creative writing in EFL classrooms is teachable. Graded readers as ‘pedagogic’ and ‘adapted’ reading materials show much noticeable potential value in creative writing teaching and learning. With controlled language, graded readers match the different levels of language competency of learners. Making full use of graded readers as extensive reading and intensive reading materials is essential to help EFL students enjoy reading, acquire English, and creative writing skills. With carefully designed activities, graded readers can function as a resource for language input and expose learners to comprehensible vocabulary and grammar use. They can also serve as a model for EFL creative writing, arouse learners’ creative language use and genre awareness, and act as a tool to elicit creativity and imagination.

Keywords: graded readers; creative writing; input; genre awareness; creativity; imagination

INTRODUCTION

The ability to produce EFL writing is commonly considered a proof of target language proficiency. Creative writing practice is helpful to transform challenging and crucial EFL writing into an exciting process, generate intrinsic motivation, and improve learners’ writing skills. It focuses on creative expression and serves as a creative act of self-discovery (Hyland, 2003). The activities refer to writing poetry, stories, plays, etc., and can be promoted at different levels. These genres embody fundamen-

tal elements such as narrative sequence, a plot, conflict, resolution and a climax. Learners equipped with the awareness of such elements can acquire writing concepts that can be transferred to other types of writing. Campbell (1998: 37) states, ‘one of life’s great releases is to express oneself in writing’. The exposure to creative writing is expected to spark learners’ motivation to convey their ideas. They should gain pleasure from the process. However, some teachers have observed and concluded that frustration can occur among learners due to the lack of confidence, the necessary

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language, and suitable stimulus for idea generation. This paper deals with making full use of graded readers to facilitate EFL creative writing teaching and learning.

THE READING AND WRITING CONNECTION

In the natural process of acquiring a language, input usually precedes output. Reading can enhance writing by allowing learners to have access to linguistic knowledge, various genres, different styles, and special cultures, which are related with EFL learners' writing competence. Learning to write cannot be separated from reading (Eisterhold, 1990). Reading skills, such as identifying useful information, comprehending a writer's purpose and viewpoint, selecting key ideas, and following the organization of ideas, are all relevant to writing. Krashen (1984: 20) states that reading that offers 'comprehensible input' could give learners the abstract knowledge of writing when they 'read for interest or pleasure'. Besides, reading often plays an important role in providing sources of topics for discussion. Campbell (1998) goes further and reports that the most immediate benefit from reading is the inspiration that learners can gain. Reading thus serves as a springboard for learners' own writing. In other words, reading can provide guidelines, models, and inspiration for writing.

GRADED READERS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNERS

The interest in using reading materials

in writing class has triggered teachers to reflect on what reading materials can be applied. Simenson (1987) classifies materials for extensive reading into three types: "authentic" (not written for language learners and published in the original language); "pedagogic" (specifically written for language learners with various types of control placed on the language); and "adapted" (adapted for language learners from authentic texts according to various principles of control set out by editors and publishers in guidelines for adaptors). As for the "pedagogic" and "adapted" reading materials, they are called "graded readers". The language control in graded readers is achieved through three methods: lexical control, which limits the size and level of vocabulary; structural control, which reduces sentence length and simplifies sentence structures; and information control, which omits or simplifies details.

The main purposes of graded readers have been examined by Hill (1997) in detail. Graded readers provide a model of accessible English language graded in difficulty, the reading of which enables learners to practice their English and develop fluency in reading. They not only promote language learning, but also provide motivation for language learning with suitable and interesting contents, which ensure learners read with alertness. Graded readers adapted from literature classics also promote literature studies and help learners learn how to appreciate language in contexts. Therefore, graded readers could constitute wonderful teaching and learning resources when explored fully.

THE VALUE OF INTEGRATING GRADED READERS INTO EFL CREATIVE WRITING TEACHING AND LEARNING

The potential value of integrating graded readers into EFL creative writing classes can be explicated in the following way. Graded readers provide learners with exposure to English at their own level in meaningful contexts, and reinforce the mastering of the target language. The experiment conducted by Hafiz and Tudor (1990) shows that an extensive reading program using graded readers as an input medium in L2 learning leads to significant gains in both fluency and accuracy of expression. Particularly, the various topics of graded readers range from ghost stories to romance and detective stories, which engage learners through the entertainment of reading, lead to discussion, and stimulate students to exert their imagination and creativity in their own creative writing practice. Graded readers also set examples about how to use language creatively and how to organize a successful piece of writing. Lastly, the way to treat graded readers as a process rather than as a product helps to involve learners in both active and significant interaction. Especially when the themes of graded readers are closely relevant to learners' own life experience, they can stir learners' emotions and arouse their personal responses.

MAKING FULL USE OF GRADED READERS TO FACILITATE EFL CREATIVE WRITING TEACHING AND LEARNING

Graded readers can be used as exten-

sive and intensive reading materials to facilitate EFL creative writing teaching and learning. When graded readers are used as extensive reading materials, teachers should give students the freedom to choose reading materials and encourage students to read as much as possible. At the same time, teachers should also orient students toward specific reading goals. Teachers as models should demonstrate the reward of extensive reading through reading practice. According to Day and Bamford (1998), extensive reading is its own reward and there should not be many follow-up exercises after reading.

However, it is far from being enough to only consider readers as extensive reading materials. It is also crucial to explore and experiment with readers as intensive reading materials and to explore what activities can be conducted creatively to maximize the teaching results. Maley (2001; 2006) concludes that there are two main categories of activities: the activities that focus on the linguistic analysis of the text, and those in which the texts are used as a springboard for a variety of language activities, including discussion and writing. In my teaching experience, the activities designed for the full use of graded readers as intensive reading materials are mainly classified into three types according to their purposes: a source for language input, a model for EFL creative writing, and a tool to elicit creativity and imagination.

1) A Source for Language Input

Learners often complain that they generally experience the lack of vocabulary to support their creative writing. To help

learners overcome this problem, graded readers can be used as a source for language input. Learners can choose appealing words from a given extract from graded readers for text creation. Since the use of the words is exemplified in the extract, it is very convenient for learners to pick them up. My students reported that when they tried to weave the words in a storyline, they made full of their imagination to find connections among the random set of words and learned how to use them in contexts creatively.

Word mapping is another way to prepare learners for creative production. Learners should find and give other words associated with a key word from a given extract and come up with words from their own vocabulary repertory. Then they write about a topic related to the key word. The writing is made easier because the word mapping process activates learners' vocabulary and serves as a bridge for idea generation. For example, after reading the short pedagogic story *The Gift of Giving*, my students came up with some words related with the word "gift". These words include: birthday, festival, holiday, flower, card, friends, family, children, bless, surprise, give, donate, accept, happy, excited, love, care, etc. My students produced many impressive stories related with the key word "gift". After the word mapping activity, one girl wrote about how her family tried to give her birthday surprise by telling white lies. They all pretended that they forgot her birthday in the morning but prepared a big birthday cake secretly and gave her many presents during lunch time.

Writing is the most grammatically demanding activity. Graded readers can be

used as examples to highlight the grammatical forms. Learners listen to teachers' explanation to learn the grammar points deductively or analyze them individually to absorb the rules inductively. To allow learners to learn grammar from their own typical errors, teachers can intentionally introduce errors into extracts from the graded readers to let learners make grammatical judgments and error correction. My Chinese students often made verb form errors in their writing because Chinese is a non-inflected language. English inflection often causes confusion and causes frequent errors. I designed the following verb form error correction exercise based on the extract from the pedagogic story *The Gift of Giving*:

"Here," I hold out my gift, "A little something for you".

"Oh, that's very kind of you, Shelley", said Aunt Gloria. She begined to unwrap her gift.

"I wonder what it could be", she murmured. Then she begined to read a card that was enclose, a card that I didn't remember have put in.

"Dear Shelley", she readed, "hope you enjoy these gloves. They'll keep your fingers warm in the winter. Love, Aunt Gloria."

Students are supposed to change the verb forms "hold" to "held", "begined" to "begin", "enclose" to "enclosed", "have" to "having", and "readed" to "read". The funny story stimulated students' interest to find and correct the errors and impressed them with the importance of grammar to good writing.

As for grammar play, learners can be asked to fill in missing words or structures in gaps introduced into extracts from selected graded readers. Reordering jumbled words to complete graded readers is another effective method. These exercises help students' be aware of more complicated sentence structure or word order errors. Indirect question errors appear often in my Chinese students' writing since Chinese use embedded direct questions in indirect questions, such as:

My aunt Gloria wondered what could it be in the gift box.

When my students were asked to make sentences with jumbled words, they were very careful with their grammar and this process helped them acquire grammar.

2) A model for EFL creative writing

EFL learners need models to guide their creative writing. Graded readers can be applied as model for creative language use as well as examples of different genres.

Graded readers show how language works flexibly and can arouse learners' enthusiasm to play with the language that they have learned. This process helps them discover that language is not an external mechanical system. The creative language use in graded readers should be used as examples for learners to imitate, and as devices to engage learners in manipulating language knowledge for fun and for conveying their own ideas.

Graded readers also demonstrate how different creative writing genres are organized such as poems, stories, plays and can arouse students' genre awareness. Take

story writing as an example, teachers should bear in mind that learners are not born with the techniques of starting a story, developing the plot, building suspense to a climax, and finally ending a story. Learners can start from reordering jumbled plots of graded readers. Then they can try to provide missing elements that have been removed from sample plots.

3) A Tool to Elicit Learners' Creativity and Imagination

Graded readers expose learners to products made of creativity and imagination. Teachers should exploit them thoroughly to help learners produce engaging creative writing in the following aspects.

It is necessary to activate and nourish students' ability to use five senses: see, hear, smell, touch, and taste, to describe people and objects. The use of five senses helps the production of vivid description and gives readers a specific picture. Learners need explicit guidelines to learn how to appreciate and visualize descriptions in graded readers with their five senses. After reading, they can be asked to draw pictures to show what they have seen or use certain sound to show what they have heard through imagination. When it comes to practice, teachers can ask learners to use words that associate with certain senses for the description of people or objects. I once used the following sentences from the Penguin Reader *Oliver Twist* to illustrate concrete description of hunger: "The boys' bowls never needed washing. They polished them with their spoons till they shone again and when they had performed this operation they would sit staring eagerly at

the huge pot”. The description conveys much more than the abstract word “hunger”. All the students were deeply impressed with how hungry the boys were. They gradually learned how to record the memories of their senses in their description to evoke their readers’ senses.

Illustrations should be presented to learners to stimulate and develop their power of observation, and to prompt various interpretations. Many graded readers, especially those for low level learners, are often illustrated to provide visual enhancement to the words and help to involve the learners in the story. For instance, I made full use of the twenty-seven illustrations in the Cambridge Discovery Reader *A Little Trouble in the Yorkshire Dales* in the pre-reading and after-reading activities. They functioned as the rich base of visual information of the adventure of the American twins and stimulated students’ reading motivation, imagination of the characters and prediction of plots of the story.

Learners should be trained to use dialogue to make their writing lively because dialogue is essential to develop stories and plays. Exposure to stories and plays helps raise learners’ awareness of the functions of dialogues. As for writing practice, the starting point can be completing or writing short conversations for illustrations of a reader or transforming a short story into a play. I often remind my students to include conversations in their own stories consciously. These effective practice made my students understand how dialogues with carefully-chosen dictions could help reveal aspects of characters like their personality, education background, age etc.. They also learned to use dialogues to tell events in

the past or future plans of characters, and in so doing, they developed plot of their stories.

Plot-creating can help to cultivate learners’ creativity because the activity can arouse widely differing responses and motivate them to produce personal creative output. Learners can be asked to guess and write down what happens before, after, or in the midst of a particular scene from extracts of a reader. Learners’ creativity and imagination can be fully engaged during group brainstorming sessions. The ending of the short story *Beyond the Shadow of a Doubt* is upset. The original story goes like this: Sarah was invited by Jason, her new boy friend, to his place. When she arrived and was ready to knock the door of Jason’s flat on the first floor, Sarah saw a woman taking off her clothes behind the very thin curtain. Sarah left immediately with anger. She never answered Jason’s phone. One month later Sarah learned from one article of a fashion magazine that Jason won the best young fashion designer and he often worked with his models in his flat. My students turned the story into a comedy with the unpredictable plot: Sarah was very angry but she was also very curious about what was happening inside. She pushed the door with much strength. Bang! A woman whose figure was just like Sarah’s was in a beautiful gown. Jason looked very excited, “Sarah! I just finished this wedding gown for you. My model tried it for you. It must suit you. Please marry me”. My students also created other incredible endings for the story, which showed how much they were fond of the imaginative activity and the positive learning result.

CRITERIA FOR SELECTING GRADED READERS

Based on my own teaching experience, the following criteria are suggested for selecting the reading materials carefully with the purpose to help teachers and learners reap numerous benefits from purposeful use of graded readers. First of all, graded readers should supply learners with texts at appropriate levels. Syntactic complexity, lexical density, and discourse organization can indicate the linguistic difficulty of a text (Duff and Maley, 1990). Secondly, regarding learners' motivation, the themes to be addressed in a classroom setting should be relevant to learners' interest, which to a great extent depends on learners' age and experiences in life. Thirdly, preference should be given to graded readers with attractive illustrations. Pictures are widely acknowledged as being effective in delivering meaning and helping understanding. Additionally, they can elicit learners' imagination and promote their creativity. Lastly, from the pedagogic standpoint, any graded readers to be used in class should have the capacity to be used to design activities suitable for the teaching purposes.

CONCLUSION

The whys and hows of using graded readers in creative writing classrooms have been explored. It is hoped that the full use of graded readers can help teachers find it easier to teach creative writing, equip learners with the notion of what constitutes a good writing, and improve their writing skills through active interaction and prac-

tice. However, this ideal learning effect cannot happen overnight. In addition, teachers need to further explore the use of graded readers with more flexibility and creatively in different contexts to provide learners with a thorough preparation for their own creative writing practice. Apart from teaching learners reading and writing, teachers should set good examples and personally be fond of reading and creative writing. Their enthusiasm is quite likely to orient learners toward the goals that they are expected to achieve.

Note:

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