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Enhancing ESL Writing Creativity via a Literature Based Language Instruction

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Abstract: The notions of success in learning writing in English is associated with self-expressions, the flow of ideas, outsider expectations, growing confidence and enjoyment of L2 academic writing. The most common problem that confronts teachers of a writing class does not lie so much on what to ask the students to write about; the difficulty is more on motivating the students to write interesting and effective materials or in other words, creative pieces of essays. What constitutes and contributes to language creativity in writing? This paper discusses the results of a quasi-experiment in which a literature – based language instruction was incorporated in an ESL writing class to evaluate the language creativity of students' essays. Descriptive and inferential statistics show that a literature based language instruction can help students develop creativity in classroom writing.

Key words: literature based language instruction; creativity and language creativity

INTRODUCTION

As learners of ESL, UiTM students face problems in the writing skill compared to other basic language skills (Elia, Kardina & Nazirah, 2006). Writing has for a long time been claimed as a very difficult skill to acquire and dreaded by ESL students (Gupta, 1998). Writing for the sake of writing has become a drag, and produces shallow, boring output. In most proficiency courses, some of these students are sorely lacking in practice and stimulus for imagination and creativity. To a certain degree their writing in

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general reads dull and dry, their stories are merely displays of boring chronological events, having no life, content and direly lacking in proficiency. With mother tongue interference, they are further handicapped in the domain of creative and imaginative writing. Undoubtedly they have difficulties going beyond the surface idea in writing, i.e. having problems in proficiency, elaborating ideas and lacking subject knowledge and content details which are essential elements important in making an essay linguistically competent, interesting and creative. However one way of overcoming this according to Hismanoglu (2005) is through literature. Literature enhances writing skills when students learn the syntax and discourse functions of sentences, the variety of possible structures, and the different ways of connecting ideas thus developing and enriching their own writing skills. This paper focuses on the writing skill of students as the aim is to find a method of text criticism that could bear some systematic relation to the development of linguistic as well as creative and literary skills through a literature instruction in an ESL class.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A study of literature often involves themes, characters and events that address complex situations and dilemmas which engage students intellectually, emotionally and linguistically. As literature introduces a varied of materials such as poems, plays, novels and other genres, it makes learning and teaching more interesting and fun. In turn it also introduces a change in activity and is certainly a different or creative way of engaging the students.

According to Spack (1985) literature teaching in language classroom has been acknowledged as conducive to academic, intellectual, cultural and linguistic learning. Widdowson (1975) has stressed that the study of literature is essentially a study of language and both are inseparable as they create “a sharp awareness of the communicated resources of the language being learnt” (p.81). This fact has been also stressed by others who state that the teaching of literature provides the student with abundance of examples of the subtle and complex uses of idioms, literary knowledge and vocabulary enrichment. It is through literature that learners can be introduced to what Gwin (1990, p. 10) calls the “subtle elements that go into the creation of what is called good writing”. When students read literary works it gives them the opportunity to come up with their own insights, helping them to think, speak and write in a more imaginative way. Oster (1989) claims students become more creative since they are faced with their own point of view of the characters of the story. Through all these cognitive processes, students who analyze what they read therefore will also start thinking critically of what they have read. They “make judgements, be decisive, come to conclusions, synthesize information, organize, predict and apply knowledge” (Howie, 1993, p.24).

Creativity

Although there are a wealth of studies, commentaries and investigations on creative thinking, this topic remains complex and confusing after many decades. Researchers have yet to arrive at an acceptable and clear definition of creativity.

Definition of Creativity

Educational psychologists agree that creativity is an important educational concept of which its definition has been difficult to pin down. Nevertheless the elusiveness of defining creativity has not deterred attempts at this difficult task. There are many definitions of creativity that have been put forward but there is no universally accepted definition or method for quantitative conclusions on creativity (Troda, as cited in Khatena, 1977). Creativity is paralleled with uniqueness, originality,

cognitive thinking, problem solving, cultural norms and values and much more. According to Anderson (1965) creativity represents the emergence of something unique, exceptional and original. Of the widely accepted definitions of creative thinking, one which comes from Torrance, from his prodigious research:

...a process of becoming sensitive to problems, deficiencies, gaps in knowledge, missing elements, disharmonies and so on. Identifying the difficulty; searching for solutions, making guesses or formulating hypotheses about the deficiencies, testing and retesting these hypotheses and possibly modifying and retesting them; and finally communicating the results.
(1974, b, p. 8)

Creativity and Education

In the world of education specifically in the field of mastering and excelling in the learning the English Language, creativity is considered more of a tool or device rather than a gift or special ability. There are also arguments that creativity in language can be learned. For example, Narramore (1992) points out the importance of methodological and attitudinal considerations as being useful in enhancing creativity. Her research confirms the crucial role of the teacher. According to her the teacher's classroom behaviour should include creative thinking that should provide creative instruction and develop a situation in which creative thinking predominates. In linking creativity to critical thinking skills, Sotto (1994, p.200) claims that an understanding of creativity holds the key to "learning all learning". It leads on to a higher order of cognitive thinking that requires a mindset change. A creative person is curious, lacking in rigidity, free from stereotype thinking methods with flexibility and open-mindedness. For Lakoff (1980), use of metaphor is something through which we perceive the world, understand the meaning both in language and thought. Therefore it becomes a cognitive-creative action.

Creativity and the English Language

The term "creative writing" in literature which is used in English courses ranging from school to university, usually refers to writing which takes the forms of stories, poems and plays. The word "creative" is attached to such writing because it is seen as doing something new, either new in idea and what it is saying, or new in its technique of writing or both. Thus this sometimes means that creativity is often seen as a feature of literature.

According to Beard (2003) linguists like to categorise, and one of the main things about creativity is that it deliberately breaks outside categories. So, with a warning that this is not an inclusive list; the following are some of Beard's broad areas within which writers/ students can do something new with language.

Lexical creativity – This operates at the level of single words and phrases. Examples would be inverted new words or old words used in new contexts.

Phonological creativity – This operates on the level of sound, and can involve repetition of sounds, playing with similar sounds but different meanings and so on.

Graphological creativity – This depends upon the design of a text creating an impact on the reader. The expected and conventional layout of a text can be altered in various ways.

Semantic creativity – Semantic concerns meaning and one of the most obvious ways in which writers and speakers play with meaning is by using puns. At a deeper level, some 20th century writers have challenged the possibility of finding any meaning at all.

Grammatical creativity – Grammar involves the system and structure of a language and so is less likely to be played with than some of the other levels of language use – deviating from the rules of grammar can make texts impossible to understand. Nevertheless writers will sometimes briefly suspend the rules of grammar to make a particular impact.

Metaphor – Metaphor and other terms for comparisons are sometimes called figures of speech. It has already been noted that creativity with language often depends upon readers having prior knowledge of something. This allows writers to use a range of techniques, confident that at least some of the readers will understand what is going on. This inter textual reference can range from allusion, symbolism and etc. – a passing reference to another text – to a much more significant use of imitation , such as parody and satire.

Writing

Writing is a requirement in any level of academic pursue and not only limited to language arts curricula. This is parallel with the goal of a writing program which is to enable students to produce different kinds of texts which they will most frequently encounter in educational, institutional and/or personal contexts (Richards, 1990). The notion of success in learning English writing is associated with self-expressions, the flow of ideas, outsider expectations, growing confidence and enjoyment of L2 academic writing. This clearly shows that a good writing involves the ability to express ideas clearly and confidently to readers which many language learners are weak in (Basturkmen & Lewis, 2002).

Literature Based Writing Instruction

There is no denying that a study of literature introduces “learners (to) the subtle elements that go into the creation of what is called a good writing” (Gwin, 1990, p.10). Literature exposes learners to coherent and expert writing which can help them to write better. Reading literary texts from different authors would introduce to our learners different writing styles and this unconsciously helps learners develop their own writing styles. As many of our learners do not want to open up and voice out opinions in class, writing tasks developed from the study of a literary texts (e.g. writing about a character or the point of view of a character) provides learners a voice in the writing class that is solely theirs and authentic. Oster (1989) affirms that literature helps students to write creatively. Instructors can create a variety of writing activities to help students to develop their writing skills. Murdoch (2002) suggests that instructors can ask students to write dialogues and plays if their students have reached a high level of language proficiency.

Walmsley and Walp (1990) suggest that written literacy can be a major vehicle for gaining access to, enlarging, and communicating knowledge. Wixson, Peter and Potter (1996) characterize the base of intra-disciplinary units as the issues, themes, and problems within literature and other oral, visual and written texts where students pursue important questions, enhancing the relevance of the language arts themselves. Within this category, the language processes may be applied directly to reading, interpreting, and responding to literature (e.g., a literary text, a collection of literature related by author or genre). Alternatively, language processes may be linked more generally to literary themes for understanding humanity (Galda, 1998), with instructional foci on developing students' understandings of these themes through activities grounded in using written and oral language and, more recently, viewing.

METHOD

The specific research design employed was quasi-experimental design in that subjects were not randomly assigned to treatments. Specifically, the design employed was a non - equivalent control-group design with pretest -posttest design. In this design one quasi-experiment was conducted with two groups, the control and experimental groups. The control group was taught using a reading and comprehension activity and the experimental group was taught a literature based approach specifically Ibsen's 1990 *The I - model* text exploration, a reader response method, and handouts of notes on literary devices.

Research Hypothesis -

Hypothesis One (H_o^{1a}):

H_o^{1a} : There is no significant difference between the pretest and posttest performance of the experimental group in the language creativity aspect.

H_o^{1b} : There is no significant difference between the experimental group and the control group in the posttest performance for the language creativity aspect.

Sample

A total of 60 students (N=60) from two classes of BEL 200 of the Hotel and Catering Faculty at Dungun Campus participated in this research. Both were intact groups. The experimental group (N=30) belonged to the Diploma in Food Science Management or DFSM programme and the control group (N=30) belonged to the Diploma in Culinary Art or DCA programme. As mentioned earlier since this is a quasi-experimental study specifically non-equivalent control-group design, the samples were not randomized.

Research Instrument

A short story by a Malaysian writer entitled *The Burden of Sin* by R. Karthigesu with the length of 2012 words and 63 paragraphs was chosen. Briefly the story is about how an Indian father rejected an inter-racial love relationship between his son and his Malay neighbour's daughter and lived to regret it. He returned to the village after twenty five years to "wash the burden of his sin" an allusion to Hindu religious practices. The short story mostly in simple language and dialogue form consists of some Malay words and this story is used as a text in the B.ED (TESL) literature programme. The story was chosen for its interesting storyline and average difficulty of language. It also appeals to teenagers' interest as it is about love and the disappointment and disillusion that come along with it.

The short story was distributed to the students to be read in the first week. Before the pretest was conducted, a pilot test was run on a few samples from the same population involving another intact group to test whether the expected answers can be gauged from students answering the essay question. Next the pretest question was handed out to the students where students had to answer based on their comprehension of the short story. Later the experimental group underwent a two week intervention programme where they were taught text exploration using Ibsen's 1990 The I-model, a reader response approach, along with lectures on literary terms and devices. Meanwhile the control group underwent a normal reading and comprehension activity. Then a posttest was administered on both groups. The question was similar in content as the pretest question but dissimilar in structure (Appendix A).

Treatment / Intervention/ Instructional Procedures

This study employed the reader-response technique to engage the students' interest in literature. The dependent variable or the experimental group was taught using a modified version of The I-Model by Ibsen (1990). According to Ibsen, this method of text exploration will acknowledge the readers' own terms of response to the literary text as well as develop proficiency, communicative, creative and cultural competences in the readers. The following was carried out with the experimental group.

Stages of Text Exploration adapted from Ibsen's (1990) The I-model.

A. Involvement Stage

This stage is further divided into two sub stages, which are impetus stage and the input stage.

a. The Impetus stage encompasses pre-reading activities. It functions as the initiation stage for reading. The instructor, here, provided questions or cues pertaining to the reading text. For example, before reading *Burden of Sin*, the instructor elicited responses from students on their perception of inter-racial love and marriage.

b. During the Input stage, the language(literary devices) and the content of the reading text is focused. The students were provided with copies of notes on literary elements of short stories and literary elements. These were thoroughly elaborated and discussed during the treatment period. Then students were asked to list down the literary devices such as similes, symbols, metaphors that they can identify in the short story.

B. Interaction Stage

This stage is divided into two parts; the Identification Stage and the Incubation Stage. During these stages, the reader and the story interact and there is active reading and negotiation of meaning.

a. The Identification Stage requires the readers to assume the role of certain characters in the story. For example students acted out certain scenes out of the story such as Sulaiman's anger when he found out that his daughter loved Devan, Hasnah's and Devan's tearful parting when Velu decided to leave the village, Velu's return to the village after 25 years and meeting again with his friend, Sulaiman and etc. By assuming the characters in the story, the readers will be able to foster greater understanding of the story as they will be able to gain wider perspectives of the subject matter.

b. The Incubation Stage is the time for reflection and after thought. To further elicit comprehension, a reader response handout was distributed.

C. Interpretation Stage

This stage focuses on the integration of the text/short story. The input and knowledge obtained from the story together with the learning of basic tenets of literature and literary devices were assimilated and condensed by the students to form a holistic understanding of the text.

Data Collection Procedure

The essays collected from the students after the administration of pre and post tests served as the data for the research. They were later coded with numerals that only one researcher can identify. The essays were open ended information which needed to be codified before quantitative measures could be applied. For this purpose content analysis steps for data analysis were applied. Some measures were conducted in the content analysis procedure. In order to observe reliability and validity of measurement during content analysis and grading of the essays, an external judge or rater was employed. The rater or judge specializes in the area of literature.

Measurement

To test creativity, a Likert scale of between 1 - 5 (1 for Not evident, 2 for Vague, 3 for Evident, 4 for Fairly Evident and 5 for Very Evident) was developed based on Troda's definition of creativity(cited in Khatena,1977)to determine whether the essay was creative. The essays were rated by the external judge or rater. Frequency count on students' use of literary elements and figurative language in their essays are counted and tabulated (Table 1.3).

Data Analysis Procedure

The data gathered in numerical form through the content analysis technique was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. In the descriptive analysis, the individual scores for the pretest and posttest were recorded according to the areas of interests being tested and the suitable form of measurement for each area. The raw score of the pre and post tests were presented in a table Based on the data, an average score (the mean score) of each group; the experimental and the control group was tabulated. The difference of the mean scores of both the groups was tabulated. The difference of the mean scores of both the groups was indicated to determine which group had performed better in the post test. The tabulated mean score is important in any experimental research because comparing means is the most common way to test hypotheses pertaining to different methods or treatments. This is also the most satisfactory measure of characterizing a group. To obtain the mean scores, the total scores of each group were totalled up and then divided by the total number of the subjects in the corresponding group. This procedure is later followed by an inferential analysis.

Since the samplings were not randomised we used a non-parametric test to elicit this information. We employed the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test and the Mann-Whitney U test. The Wilcoxon Signed Rank test was used to determine whether the distribution of scores in (two samples) the pretest and posttest differed significantly to reject our hypotheses. Whilst the Mann-Whitney U test was used to determine whether the distribution of scores of two independent samples (experimental and control groups) differed significantly from each other to support us in proving our hypotheses.

FINDINGS

Creativity Performance of the Experimental Group in the Pretest and Posttest

Table 1.1: Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test for related measures for Language Creativity

		Ranks ^d		
		N	Mean	Sum of Ranks
Creativity-Posttest Score				
Creativity - Pretest Score	Negative	0 ^a	.0	.0
	Positive	3 ^b	15.5	465.00
	Ties	0 ^c		
	Total	3		
a	Creativity - Posttest Score < Creativity - Pretest			
b	Creativity - Posttest Score > Creativity - Pretest			
c	Creativity - Pretest Score = Creativity - Posttest			
d	Group Orientation = Experimental Group			

Test Statistics^{b,c}

Creativity - Posttest Score - CreativityPretest Score	
Z	-4.871 ^a
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

- a. Based on negative ranks.
- b. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test
- c. Group Orientation = Experimental Group

The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test for related measures in the table above had yielded the following results $z = -4.871$, $N = 30$, $p < 0.05$. It can be deduced that there is a significant difference between the mean ranks (scores) of the pretest and posttest as attained by the subjects of the experimental group. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_0^{1a}) that says there is no difference between the pretest and posttest performance of the experimental group ought to be rejected. In other words, there is also a significant improvement in the performance of the students in the aspect of language creativity after going through the treatment phase.

Creativity Performance of the Experimental and Control Groups in the Pretest and Posttest

Table 1.2: Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples for Language Creativity

Ranks						
			Group	N	Mean	Sum of Ranks
Creativity	-	Pretest	Experimental	3	28.1	845.0
			Control	3	32.8	985.0
			Total	6		
Creativity	-	Posttest	Experimental	3	40.9	1228.5
			Control	3	20.0	601.5
			Total	6		

Test Statistics^a

	Creativity - Pretest Score	Creativity - Posttest Score
Mann-Whitney U	380.000	136.500
Wilcoxon W	845.000	601.500
Z	-1.097	-4.841
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.272	.000

a. Grouping Variable: Group Orientation

The Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples in the table above had yielded the following results: $z = -4.841$, $N = 30$, $p < 0.05$ in the posttest. It can be deduced that there is a significant difference between the mean ranks (scores) of the experimental and the control groups in the posttest. On the other hand, the pretest result shows the mean ranks (scores) difference between the two groups was not significant ($z = -1.097$, $N = 30$, $p > 0.05$), suggesting that the subjects of both the control and experimental groups belong to the same level in terms of their language creativity before the treatment phase. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_0^{lb}) that says there is no difference between the experimental group and the control group in the posttest performance ought to be rejected. In other words, the subjects of the experimental group had performed significantly better in the language creativity aspect, in the post test after undergoing the intervention stage, as compared to the subjects of the control group who did not undergo any treatment. Both these findings by the non-parametric tests are supported by the frequency counts on use of literary elements and figurative language used by the samples in the pretest and posttest as illustrated below in table 1.3.

Table 1.3: Frequency Counts on use of literary elements and figurative language

Literary Elements	Control Group		Experimental Group	
	Pretest	Post test	Pretest	Post test
Moral Values	3	11	2	6
Plot		3		8
Setting				4
Character	5	8	6	18
Point of view		1		7
Theme	4	4	3	6
Language (Simple, plain and easy)	3	8	2	16
Manglish	2	8	1	4
Use of Malay words	1	4	1	6

To be continued...

Continued...

Literary Elements	Control Group		Experimental Group	
	Pretest	Post test	Pretest	Post test
Translated Malay proverb	1	4	1	5
Tone and mood				8
Connotation and denotation				2
Metaphor				6
Simile	1	2	1	5
Imagery	1	5	2	12
Allusion		3		11
Figurative language (in general)		1		5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test for related measures reads: $z = -4.871$, $N = 30$, $p < 0.05$ (Table 1.1) and this correlates with the Mann-Whitney U test: $z = -4.841$, $N = 30$, $p < 0.05$ (Table 1.2) indicating a significant difference in outcome of language creativity. This finding goes on to authenticate claims by other researchers that literature helps enhance language creativity. It is through literature that learners can be introduced to what Gwin (1990) calls the “subtle elements that go into the creation of what is called good writing” (p. 10). Anderson (1965) opines that language creativity can be learned. This claim can be proven if students are exposed to the world of literature. When students read literary works it gives them the opportunity to come up with their own insights, helping them to think, speak and write in a more imaginative way. Moreover students become more creative since they are faced with their own point of view of the characters of the story (Oster (1989). Furthermore elements of literature such as plot, setting, theme and literary devices such as metaphor and simile can help to promote essay writing and creativity (Beard, 2003).

On this note many students in the experimental group described the setting, plot, characters and etc. in the story when answering the posttest (see Table 1.3). Examples of students’ scripts are as follows;

“The **theme** of this story is true friendship between two friends; Velu and Sulaiman, who are from different race and tradition, break up after Velu did not consent to the marriage between his son, Devan and Suliaman’s daughter, Hasnah.

The **two major characters** in “*The Burden of Sin*” are Velu and Sulaiman. Velu is of an unmoving emotion...” (Farhana Azwani, an experimental group participant).

Siti Suraya, another experimental group participant writes, “The muddy water of the kampong river is a reflection of Velu’s life, that he has sinned” (**metaphor**).

“The **theme** of this story is true friendship between two friends; Velu and Sulaiman, who are from different race and tradition, break up after Velu did not consent to the marriage between his son, Devan and Suliaman’s daughter, Hasnah.

“The author gives a realistic picture of the Malay life and practices. There are some **imageries** used in the story, for example “The latex had dried to a golden yellow at the place where it had been tapped” explains an imagery of the kampong...”

The two major characters in “*The Burden of Sin*” are Velu and Sulaiman. Velu is of an unmoving emotion...”Velu’s action in not consenting the marriage became the biggest mistake that he **have**(language error by student) done in his life as in this story he thinks that it is his sins and they burden him so much. That **make** (language error by student) him come back to the village but he is not able to do so as the kampong river is already muddy and maybe muddled; a reflection of him and he has to carry the burden a little while longer.

In conclusion, in terms of classroom practice and instruction design, this study has the following implications. First, literature, when selected carefully, can be a valuable resource for integrative ESL learning. Since stories tend to invoke our imagination and desire for creating, composition classes can be conducted better than the drab routines of students-write-and-teacher-correct routine by injecting the elements of interest and fun. Students in the experimental group read out loud the story and role-played the parts. They also shared their reflections on what they had read during discussions, and oftentimes revealed themselves when they found the stories related to their personal experiences. They were able to display some level of critical and creative ability in writing and these were reflected in their essays. Since the goal of ESL teaching is to help students to communicate fluently; whether orally or written in the target language, language instructors must diversify their focuses of attention to not only include linguistic aspects but also other benefits. Apart from teaching the four language skills, a literature based instruction helps instructors to teach literary, cultural and higher order aspects. Literature helps students to expand their linguistic and cognitive skills, cultural knowledge and sensitivity; unity in diversity.

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APPENDIX A

Pretest Question

- Q1. Can this story promote good relationship between Malaysians of diverse beliefs and practices?
- Q2. Do you think that Velu made a mistake in not accepting Hasnah's and Devan's love?

Posttest Question

Malaysia is a multiracial country.

- Q1. Do you think this story can help enhance the relationship between the different races in Malaysia?
- Q2. Is Velu wrong in not consenting to the marriage?