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Exploring poems to promote language learners' creative writing

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Abstract

This article describes how poems can effectively be used to foster EFL/ESL students' creative writing. The paper starts with discussing the meaning of creativity, and the importance of creativity within the language learning process. Then, it proceeds to demonstrate how students' creative writing can be fostered by composing English poems. A three-stage *writing-using model* advocated by Bouman (1983) is employed to promote students' creative writing skills. Creativity in writing is assessed using a rubric specifically designed for this study. Sample writings of poems produced by learners are included to illustrate how the use of model poems, which is used as a source of input, can facilitate creative writing.

Keywords: Creative writing; rubrics; poem; creative thinking; assessment of writing

1. Creativity in ELT

In its most basic sense, Perkins (1981) defines the concept *creative* as 'original and of high quality' (p. 6). According to Boden (2001) 'creativity' is the 'ability to come up with new ideas that are surprising yet intelligible, and also valuable in some way' (p. 95). Language creativity involves different types of creative thinking, and the

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playful use of language to construct new and surprising meaning (Boden, ibid.). Recently, the importance of language play and creative language use in language learning has been emphasized (Carter 2004; Cook 2000). It is accepted that the need to say something new, particularly meaning 'new to self', helps learners broaden their existing vocabulary and grammar, combine familiar words in unfamiliar ways and develop complex grammar (Tin, 2011).

1.1. What is creative writing?

Maley (2012) considers creative writing as an aesthetically motivated, highly disciplined and a personal activity that deals less in facts than in the imaginative representation of emotions, events, characters and experiences. The inclusion of creative writing in the language teaching practices is justified due to several reasons:

First, creative writing aids language development at the level of grammar, vocabulary, and discourse. As learners manipulate the language in interesting ways to express uniquely personal meanings, they necessarily engage with the language at a deeper level of processing, which leads to significant gains in grammatical accuracy and originality of lexical choice.

Second, creative writing fosters 'playfulness', which encourages learners to play creatively with the language, to explore the language and discover things not only about the language but about themselves (Cook, 2000). Creative writing also feeds into more creative reading and the development of aesthetic reading skills, which provide the learner with a better understanding of textual construction and contributes to their writing. In addition, creative writing puts the emphasis on the right side of the brain, which focuses on feelings, physical sensations, intuition, and the like. This leads to a balance between the logical and the intuitive thinking. It also allows scope for learners whose hemisphere preference or dominance may not be left-brain where more logical thinking is said to reside.

Brookhart (2010) considers the foremost characteristics of creative students as those who can put things together in new ways, construct more novel products, use more unconventional imagery to make points, observe ordinary things and find in them an area to wonder about. As Maher suggests (1986, 328), 'writing poetry, which involves the full personality of the individual, is first and foremost, a 'playful' activity'. Once students explore poetic language, they can gain useful ideas for creative writing. In this respect, writing poetry can be a significant stimulation for students' creativity.

1.2. Poetry in creative writing

Researchers have suggested that one way in which creativity is manifested in writing is through the poems (McGovern & Hogshead, 1990; Cubukcu, 2010; Lazar, 1996; McKay, 1982). Poems present interesting themes and meaningful language, thereby increase emotional awareness in the learners, and motivating learners not only emotionally but also cognitively to communicate creatively in L2 (Lazar, 1996).

Poems deal with universal themes and human concerns; hence, they offer opportunities for students to project their feelings and emotions, thus fostering personal involvement in writing tasks, which plays an important part in learning a foreign language (Heath, 1996). Through exploring the poem, readers can discover important ideas for themselves. Producing a poem is more than a mechanical exercise; it demands a personal response from learners and encourages them to draw on their own experiences. Each student may respond to poems differently. Poems provide a basis or a stimulus, and serve as a good model for creative writing. As suggested by Maher (1986) writing poetry involves the full personality of the individual, and is first and foremost, a 'playful' activity.

Poems encompass human dilemma, conflict, love and sorrow that may be universal, and they often elicit strong reactions from learners. By providing emotional response, 'learners become more personally involved in the process of language learning and can begin to own the language they learn more fully' (Lazar 1996, 773). Once students explore the poetic language, they can gain useful ideas for creative writing. In this respect, writing poetry can be a significant stimulation for student creativity. As acknowledged by Collie and Slater (1987, 226) 'using poetry in the classroom can lead naturally on to freer, creative written expression'.

Poems, as a literary genre, have the potential of providing a valuable resource for presenting the structures of the language in authentic texts in EFL/ESL classes, and being used as a vehicle to practice language items by

exposing students to 'authentic models – real language in context' (Brumfit and Carter, 1987, 15). Thus, the poems appropriate to the students' level of proficiency and their interest can be used for the purpose of presentation and practice of language use, and as a model of students' creative writing.

1.3. The writing-using model

In the *writing-using model*, which the present study is based on, the origional poem serves as a good model, a stimulus for creative writing, a source of input for language awareness, and an inspiration for students to write their own poem. The model involves three main stages: *presentation, exploration* and *follow-up* (Bouman, 1983).

In the *presentation stage*, the poem is made comprehensible to learners to help them create a 'mental set' to facilitate access to the poem (Maley & Duff, 1987). The *exploration* is the stage where the students are helped to grasp the meaning of the poem, and have an understanding of concepts, emotions, the grammatical structure, vocabulary, figurative language, and the like. In the *follow-up stage*, the students are encouraged to transform their understanding into meaningful creative expressions to produce a poem from their own point of view. During the process of composing poems, the students can be given feedback about creativity and the use of language. An earlier study conduced by Kırkgöz (2008) demonstrated that setting up tasks employing the w*riting-using model,* and using a poem as a source of input became highly conducive to creativity in writing and consolidating grammar, and vocabulary knowledge of EFL/ESL students.

2. The study

The present study was conducted with 32 prospective teacher candidates (age 19-22) with intermediate level language proficiency over one semester, lasting 14 weeks, at the ELT Department of a state university in Turkey.

2.1. Methodology

Employing the above-described *writing-using model* in the present study*,* the first model poem I have chosen to illustrate is composed by the British poet, George Eliot, which is given below:

You love the roses – so do I.
I wish the sky would rain down roses, as they rain
From off the shaken bush.
Why will it not?
Then all the valley would be pink and white
And soft to tread on.
They would fall as light
As feathers, smelling sweet; and it would be
Like sleeping and like waking, all at once!

In the above poem, using roses as a symbol to represent *love and beauty*, the poet expresses his wishes by creating a visual image, in which the sky would peacefully rain rose pebbles with nice fragrance, like rain drops, and the entire valley would be covered with rose pebbles to walk on using wish clause Type II. As a follow-up to studying this model poem, the students composed their own version, using the same grammar structure. Being exposed to the model poem generated opportunities for creativity, allowing one to see new perspectives on familiar things, expressed in quite unfamiliar ways, as in the poem written by a student titled *water lily.*

The student composed poem: *Water lily*

I wish I would be a water lily on a river
Where the little fairies land on

Wherever I want to go I could float on

I wish I could be a water lily on a river
Where the little frogs remain forever
The home of all lonely fairies and dismissed memories

I wish I could be a water lily on a river
The temple of the lovers one another
And the only witness of their love towards each other

I wish I could be a water lily on a river
And remain there forever and ever (*Student 1)*

    As suggested by Maley (2012), the strange and unfamiliar scenes encountered in the model poem can promote language creativity, enabling one to transform a familiar topic in an unfamiliar way, which is particularly the case in the above student composed poem. Creating a poem gave the students a unique opportunity to use the language in meaningful context, as illustrated in the following poem composed by another student.
The student composed poem: *Wishes*

I wish I could be a painter
That would go around the world
Painting with a magic brush
And enchanted colours

Love and forgiveness in every corner

I wish I could have an eraser
Capable of removing hurt, pain and grief
As well as hatred and grief
Although I know it is just a wish
Still it can be a prayer   (*Student 8)*

    Below is the poem of another student which is written after exploring the same model poem by George Eliot. The student composed poem clearly illustrates how meaningful it becomes for the student to communicate with a picture and how creative he can become in writing.   .

The student composed poem: *The Picture*

It's not just a picture…
It's something like a mother..
As soon as I open the door, I see it.
It says "welcome to your home to your paradise".

It sometimes laughs at me
Sometimes enjoys with me
Sometimes makes me furious
It feels like me

Yet it can't talk to me
I wish it would talk to me
Would dance with me when I am happy

Would help solve my problems
Would touch my shoulders when I'm sorry
I see the meaning of life in its eyes
I wish it would see similar meanings in mine. (Student 12)

The next model poem I will demonstrate is composed by William Butler Yeats called 'When You Are Old'. Using *Life is a journey* metaphor, the poet describes, in a rather sad tone, what it would be like to be at an old age, making a nice transition to the past, and addressing several questions related to the changes a person might experience in his/her life such as in his/her face and love. A combination of simple present and past tense is used to create this effect. I found this poem particularly useful in increasing students' imagination and promoting their creativity in writing. The model poem is given below:

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars

Inspired by the model poem, the students composed a poem reflecting their imagination on what it would be like to be at an old age. Having associated all those feelings evoked by the model poem, the students created new ideas reflecting their emotional involvement through the use of the English language. Below is a sample poem composed by one student:
The student composed poem: *Desperation and Aging*

When the colour of your hair turns into grey
When you can't even walk a short distance
Take a mirror and look into it
Look and observe what changes you see.

How many wrinkles you see on your face
Every wrinkle will tell you about a painful stage of your life
Maybe it hides an impossible love story
Maybe it hides a passion for something

And sit down by the fire looking just into the fire
Take your diary and read through the old pages
Will you experience your great adventures again?
Will you be able to turn into your youth again?
It is impossible but you can feel it at least.   (*Student 9)*

The final poem I will illustrate is called 'Prayer' written by Brenna Farrell. Based on a love story, the poem describes the thoughts of one of the partners after a tragic death of his friend in a car crash, which happened

following their fight. Maley et al., (2013) suggest that 'through poems, students can voice their own life narratives in a relaxed way in which cognition, imagination, dialog, and experience interweave each other' (p. 3). In the following poem, the student narrates a similar experience he had with his girl friend. The poem is original and is of high quality. It gives readers a real sense of how the student who composed the poem felt himself after a fight with his friend. He used a format creatively and produced a fine choice of words and a poetic composition.

The student composed poem: *Crying for You*

It was dark outside
She wasn't in my sight
Because we had a fight
Suddenly I heard a scream that night
I worried about whether you were right
And how could I know you were right

Would you still be with me if I hadn't shouted at you?
But at that time I supposed my behaviours were true
I couldn't find anything to do
I was totally sorry about you *(Student 18)*

    The final poem I will illustrate is by Rudyard Kipling, in which the poet describes a list of conditions making extensive use of *if clause* Type I, giving advice as to what an individual needs to do to fit in with the society.

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you
But make allowance for their doubting too:

If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or, being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;
If you can dream---and not make dreams your master;
If you can think---and not make thoughts your aim,
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same:
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build'em up with worn-out tools;

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings,
And never breathe a word about your loss:
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"
If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings---nor lose the common touch,

If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much:
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And---which is more---you'll be a Man, my son!

As an extension to studying this poem, the students are encouraged to reflect on similar experiences they had, and explain what they learned from the model poem by giving advice in poetic form, as illustrated below:

The student composed poem: *Life*

Life is hard
If I can only keep on playing hard
Life is sometimes unfair
If I can just continue to believe in a God of justice

Life seldom turns out to be as we wished and planned
If I can only trust the Divine Province
Life is never repeated
If I can just make the most of it today   (Student 6)

Heath (1996) points out that when students move in their literary writing through a range of emotions that draw from their own memories and expectations, learning of the English language can be greatly facilitated. It is clear from all the poems illustrated in the present study that the writing task can be highly creative and constructive when the poem can be used as a source of input, through which learners are emotionally and personally involved.

Each student exhibited a range of originality and quality in their composed work. While composing poems, students were not imposed to obey the rhyming scheme; yet, finding an appropriate ending was a challenge for them. During the course of this study, each student created many poems, which provided a rich bank of writings of poems in meaningful context. In addition, the students created poems based on different themes, ranging form a love story to friendship and various other experiences.

2.2. Assessing creativity in writing

Grading creativity is not recommended. What is highly recommended is to assess 'creativity' with the help of a rubric (Brookhart, 2013). As suggested by Brookhart (*ibid.*), when created and used correctly, rubrics can be useful tools to support and enhance classroom instruction and student learning. The rubric for creativity designed for the study is adapted from Brookhart (2013). It comprises a set of criteria that describes levels of performance quality in four levels of creativity ranging from *very creative, creative, ordinary/routine* to *imitative*. The rubric assesses creativity in five areas; *variety of ideas, variety of sources, novelty of idea combinations, novelty of communication* and *overall.*

Variety of ideas component of the rubric assesses whether the student has incorporated ideas to express new and unfamiliar things not presented in the original poem; *variety of sources* component assesses the extent to which created poem draws on a variety of sources, including student's personal experiences. *Novelty of idea combinations* assesses the extent to which ideas are combined in original and surprising ways to express something new. *Novelty of communication* assesses whether the student has expressed something interesting or surprising to make the work original attending to sensory details such as those elements that are used to create images that contribute significantly to the meaning of the poem. The *overall* component assesses use of grammar, rhyme, organization and overall impact.

I shared the rubric with the students to help them understand what creativity is, and to reflect it in their writings. After the students composed their poem, I gave feedback on the level of creativity observed in their work, based on the rubric. Using poems has contributed significantly to the improvement of learners' creativity in writing. The process of manipulating the language increased students' confidence in using the language creatively and meaningfully. Besides, it gave the students a purpose for writing and allowed them to reflect on their personal feelings and ideas, which as Langer (1997) points out, many other types of writings do not encourage in foreign language learning.

3. Conclusion

This study has discussed using poetry in an EFL/ESL context to promote students' creativity in writing through composing a poem. It can be pointed out that what is missing in many classrooms is lack of tasks that contribute to the improvement of learners' creativity in writing. The creative writings illustrated in this article are different from writing tasks found in many ELT materials, where students are required to use the sentence structure to write about familiar events. In such cases, the presence of a familiar topic could lead students to retrieve known meaning rather than generating imaginative responses, constructing new and surprising meaning as in the poems composed by the students in the present study. Many of the examples used in this article come from adult language users with a high level of language proficiency; however, the ideas are relevant to other contexts.

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