



# Journal of Applied Linguistic and Intercultural Studies

journal home page: <http://jalis.uni-ruse.bg/>



## Gaining Insight into Creative Writing

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 21 September 2017

Received in revised form

22 January 2018

Accepted 26 January 2018

Available online 1 February 2018

### ABSTRACT

*The paper examines previously tested teaching material in the context of developing critical thinking skills through creative writing. The lesson plan was designed and prompted by the author's experience for the EFL students in the English department at Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University. Teachers are invited to examine the material presented in this paper to consider how it may be adapted to their own teaching environment. It discusses the significance of teaching creative writing so as to raise awareness of this important language skill and offers EFL teachers an opportunity to use the suggested lesson plan in their own classrooms. The emphasis in the paper is on both providing a general review of the purpose of teaching creative writing and presenting a practical and adaptable teaching material with its detailed procedure and description. Accordingly, the paper begins with a general survey of the nature of teaching writing and goes on to present the practical material designed for EFL teachers..*

#### Key words:

*Discovery, Generalizing Thinking, Imaginative Writing, Organization, Content*

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

It is obvious that writing is a productive skill which is very difficult to master. Because of its complexity, this is the skill in which a few of the EFL students might be claimed to be experts. There is a range of conventions concerning the layout, social function, discourse relations, etc. to be taken into account when undertaking a specific writing task. The activity of writing implies not only the ability to understand these conventions but also an ability to put them into practice. C. Tribble classifies this type of knowledge in the following way:

*Content knowledge – knowledge of the concepts involved in the subject area, context knowledge – knowledge of the context in which the text will be read, language system knowledge – knowledge of those aspects of the language system necessary for the completion of the task and writing process knowledge – knowledge of the most appropriate way of preparing for a specific writing task.*

(Tribble 1996:43).

A writing task depends on the specific type of writing. In general, students are expected to produce a piece of authentic writing, i.e. writing for real purposes for real audiences in common everyday life. Accordingly, they should be prepared to write different kinds of texts including formal, informal or semi-formal letters, postcards, CVs, letters of application, letters of complaint, narratives, essays, reports, reviews, newspaper articles, etc. Composing a written text is not a spontaneous activity. Herewith, we should note that conventions vary depending on the type of writing a student is exposed to. The English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' challenge is to teach writing in such a way so that learners could see the purpose of writing and make progress through the performance of realistic, valid, measureable and at the same time enjoyable writing activities.

With regard to this the current article will discuss the benefits of incorporating creative writing activities in the EFL classroom. Along with this it will present a sample writing task which will illustrate the ways in which foreign language (L2) teachers can implement creative writing in their intermediate English language courses with university students.

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Any piece of writing, whether or not it is intended for a specific reader has a communicative purpose. The following types of writing can be singled out:

1. Creative writing – poems, stories, novels, tall tales, drama, rhymes, songs, etc.
2. Study writing – essays, compositions, taking notes, reports, reviews, summaries, abstract, thesis, etc.
3. Social writing – emails, text messages, online posts, letters, blogs, etc.
4. Institutional writing – agendas, reviews, reports, contracts, advertisements, curricula vitae, etc.
5. Personal writing – diaries, journals, shopping lists, recipes, etc.
6. Public writing – form filling, applications, letters of complaint, requests, enquiries, etc.

Numerous articles have been written on the subject of genre analysis aiming at promoting genre-based pedagogy tendencies in EFL teaching. The EFL teachers of BSU have started to implement a genre-based approach in their own teaching contexts. Recently, we have begun to explore how to utilize extracts from fiction including poems, stories, tall tales, etc. in general English classrooms. However, few articles in the literature provide us with the resource materials and activities of practical value that would assist in conducting creative teaching and learning process in the classrooms. Accordingly, the article highlights that teachers can take advantage of the material presented here to promote creative writing tasks in their classrooms. First, I will briefly outline the process, product and genre approaches to writing, the role of creative writing teaching in language classrooms and then I will introduce the lesson plan for a classroom activity.

One thing that needs special emphasis here is that in writing, whether the text we have produced will be interpreted on its own or not depends on our own efforts.

*Sometimes writing comes easily, if we are in the right “mood” or have a clear and perhaps pressing need to express something, but as a rule, it requires some conscious mental effort: we “think out” our sentences and consider various ways of combining and arranging them... We are writing for a reader. Writing involves encoding of a message of some kind: that is, we translate our thoughts into language.*

(Byrne1997: 1)

In other words, successful written communication is the result of encoding a coherently composed text.

### ***2.1. A balanced approach to teaching writing***

It is helpful to keep in mind that writing settings differ and writers tend to communicate successfully with their readers provided that the conventions of the medium of writing are considered properly. We agree with Tribble's idea that a successful writer needs to be well aware of four interrelated sets of knowledge mentioned at the beginning of the paper so far as any of the above sets will determine to a greater extent the way a piece of writing will be effective or not. For example, some students may wish to write in business and professional settings while others may give priority to developing their writing skills in academic and study settings. In any case, students need to be able to express themselves effectively and appropriately whatever the context is. In order for students to write effectively they need to know not only the audience and the reason for writing but also they need to follow the following steps:

1. They need to generate ideas to develop – e.g. by using visual prompts, flashcards, interactive images, pictures or model texts, etc. as basis for writing.
2. They need to know how to organize their ideas – e.g. by transferring the ideas on the page, correct paragraphing, joining sentences, sequencing information logically, etc.
3. They need to develop the language required including a correct style and genre – e.g. by using grammatical structures, tenses, vocabulary, linkers, etc. correctly.
4. They need to know the mechanics of writing in English – e.g. focusing on handwriting, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, etc.

Thus, according to a modern approach, writing is a communicative act with the aim of accomplishing a specific purpose but at the same time it is a complex process in its own turn. In order to produce a piece of writing the students as English language learners are required to follow all stages of the writing process including: introducing a topic/generating ideas, organizing ideas, writing the first draft, proofreading and publishing. The process of illustrating the steps EFL students are expected to follow in writing classes is based on the ideas of Raimes (1983) summarized in Figure 1.

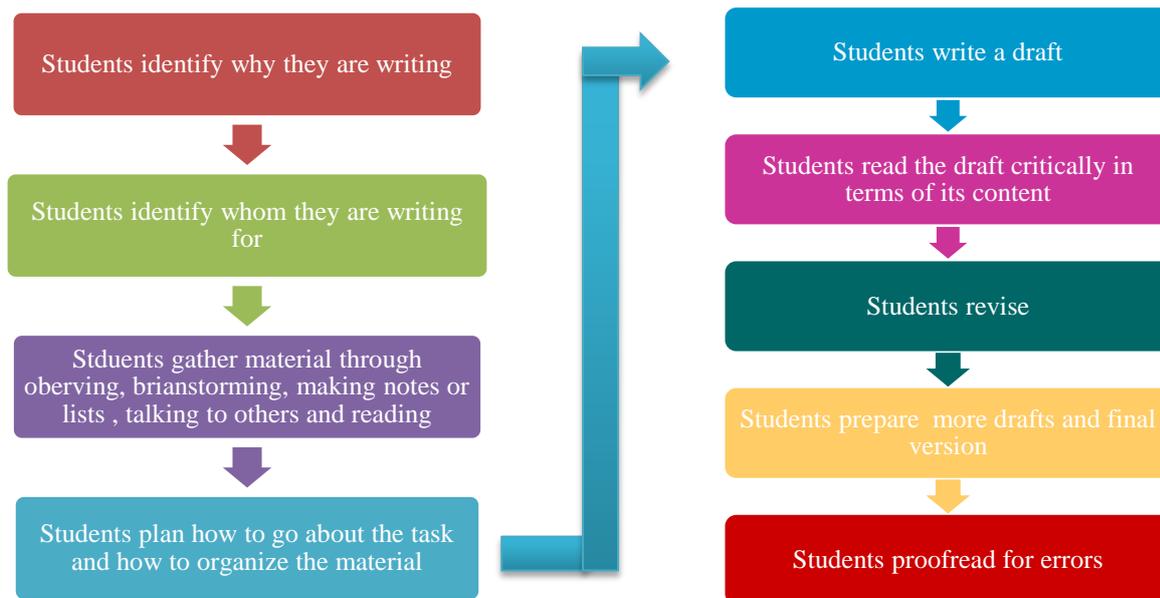


Figure 1. The Steps of writing (adapted from Raimes 1983:21)

Raimes (1983) points out that through process writing, along with the appropriate feedback from a teacher and peers as well, a learner discovers new words, sentences and ideas. S/he revises the first draft and becomes a better writer. The process approach to writing is also advocated by Boas:

*In contrast to the product approach to writing, which is based on studying and replicating textual models, the process approach involves multiple and repeated steps that compel the writer to closely consider the topic, language, purpose for writing, and social reality of an audience.*

(Boas 2011:26)

According to her, it is important to raise awareness by exposing students to several varieties of texts and opportunities for revision and feedback. In her research article, Diane Millar explains that “in product approaches, the main focus is on presenting decontextualized prescriptive text models and on teaching students how to replicate these idealized models such as the five-paragraph essay. In process writing approaches, the primary focus is on the individual writer and on teaching student writers a variety of decontextualized strategies, such as brainstorming, drafting, and self-editing. Genre researchers, on the other hand, argue that all texts depend on the context in which they are used” (Millar 2011:3). Genre proponents “aim to draw together language, content, and the context of discourse production and interpretation” (Paltridge 2001:2). It is

obvious that all approaches to writing overlap. Accordingly, we suggest that a balanced approach to writing would be a blended system which would take into consideration all of the factors that are included in a good piece of writing. Since there is no limit to the kind of texts we can ask students to write, we should, as foreign language teachers, be able to make certain assumptions and choose the writing task which will meet the students' needs and interests to a greater extent. Among various strategies to incorporate writing activities into the language course, the use of task-based, learning-centered, creative, motivating and practical teaching material stand out for its usefulness and productivity.

## **2.2. Why teach creative writing?**

The human mind possesses no real dimension and limitations. Therefore, there are no constraints to human creativity and scope of imagination. There is a kind of imaginative writing that is called "creative writing". At this point, although creative writing might be an enjoyable task for most students, we should consider the case when students, especially those who have never experienced writing a poem, for example, might feel reluctant to do the task. They might perceive such tasks as demotivating, frustrating and stressful. Such students, as a rule of thumb, tend to avoid doing a creative writing task. However, we should not assume that they will never produce a good piece of creative writing and a task that they have never dealt with should not be imposed on them. On the contrary, those students might find such tasks exciting, challenging, pleasant, useful and even therapeutic shortly afterwards they have started to shape their creative ideas on the page. In the light of this, Morley states:

*Writing is so absorbing and involving that it can make you feel more alive – concentrated yet euphoric. The process focuses at the same time as it distracts; the routine of its absorptions is addictive. It can also recreate in you something you may have lost without noticing or glimpse when you are reading a rewarding book: your sense for wonder. Certainly, the process of writing is often more rewarding than the outcome, although, when you capture something luminous, that sense of discovery and wonder swims through the words and leaps in the page. There is a pleasure in precision; in solving and resolving the riddles of your syntax and voice; and in the choices of what to lose and what to allow.*

(Morley 2007:3)

So far we have looked at the nature and purpose of writing but now we will present the general considerations of creative writing and the lesson plan describing the procedure of activities that can be used by EFL teachers in their classrooms.

*1. What is creative writing?*

Creative writing is the process of inventing or rather presenting your thoughts in an appealing way. The writer thinks critically and reshapes something known into something that is different and original. It involves designing imaginative writing tasks such as poems, stories, plays, etc. so that students are thoroughly involved in the writing process and demonstrate their creativity. Harmer asserts that when teachers set up imaginative writing tasks so that students are thoroughly engaged, those students frequently strive harder than usual to produce a greater variety of correct and appropriate language than they might for more routine assignments. While students are writing a simple poem about someone they care about, or while they are trying to construct a narrative or tell stories of their childhood, for example, they are tapping into their own experiences. This provides powerful motivation to find the right words to express such experience. Creative writing also provokes the kind of input-output relationship, it is the “product-pride” activity” (Harmer 2002:259).

*2. Can creative writing be taught?*

According to Morley (2007) creative writing is a skill that can be taught effectively only if the students have a talent for writing and are eagerly engaged in such activity. He adds that creative writing has to be taught as a craft but students need to “guide themselves, for writing is mostly a solitary pursuit, even when written collaboratively using electronic media” (Morley 2007:8). Harmer also believes that we can teach students to write creatively. The point is that we need to build up creative writing bit by bit, starting with phrases and sentences before reaching whole compositions. We should not expect whole compositions from the start.

*3. What is the use of teaching creative writing?*

It helps students become better, keener, more sensitive and experienced readers of different genres since it develops their literary mind. Moreover, it

helps learners become critical thinkers, inquirers, observers, monitors, invigilators, assessors, discoverers, creators and travellers in time and space.

The current article reports the ways in which a creative writing approach was used in an intermediate English language lesson conducted in the Georgian university context in the Republic of Adjara. It provides a series of tasks that illustrate how a creative writing approach could be implemented in the regular English language writing classes of students to promote students' creativity, imagination and experience in poem writing.

### **3. USING POEMS IN CREATIVE WRITING**

The creative writing task reported was used with a group of 16 second year students in the English Philology undergraduate programme at the Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University (Autonomous Republic of Adjara) in the spring semester of the academic 2016/2017 during the regular English language classes of the students.

The first writing task used the collaborative effort of students (divided in groups of four to six) to compose phrases which contain comparisons of fog and animals or birds.

#### **Step 1: Pre-writing activity**

In order to get students interested in the topic and to activate them for the new lesson, the teacher divided the class into three groups of four to six and explained that their task was to predict the title of the poem they were going to read next. The teacher showed the students the pictures of foggy places and asked them to discuss the pictures among peers to guess the topic. While groups worked using their vivid imagination, the teacher monitored the students and provided guiding questions to keep them focused on the task.

After the groups brainstormed their ideas, they shared them with their peers. Some of the suggested answers included: mist, sky, smoke, fog, cloud, haze, cloud. Still, the visual clues provided by the pictures worked successfully and all the groups mentioned "fog" as a key word. The teacher then informed the students that the poem which they were going to read was entitled "Fog". She asked the students to compare the "fog" to any animal, bird or insect on the basis of associations which the word "fog" evoked. Involving learners in such type of activity allowed the teacher to get students construct creative

constructions which demonstrated their abilities to experiment with the target language, to play with it and to offer linguistic inventions that illustrate the link of students to the outer world. The participants in the L2 writing class had to explore new modes of expression and produced metaphors such as: fog hisses as a snake, fog is hungry as a hound, fog snatches like an eagle, fog is as cunning as a fox, fog is as blind as a bat, fog is as quiet as a mouse.

These metaphors showed convincingly that when students were confronted with tasks that required them to produce linguistic paintings of the associations, they all coined different comparisons which reflected the pictures created in their own imagination.

### **Step 2: Drafting a poem**

During the next step the teacher showed students the poem “Fog” by Carl Sandburg with gaps (the 2<sup>nd</sup>, the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> lines are blank). Students were asked to fill in the gaps with four words on each line they thought appropriate. To help learners write a poem, the teacher provided them with guidelines (hints) on what to focus in each line. For example:

#### **Fog**

By Carl Sandburg

The fog comes

..... (describe the way it comes)

It sits looking

..... (describe who/what it looks at)

On silent haunches

..... (describe what it does)

The inclusion of such hints allowed students to think about the words they would use to communicate their ideas. The presence of a word limit was a challenge since foreign language learners had not only to paint images with words, but also experiment with grammar, syntax and phonology.

Some of the produced texts by the students contained the following images:

(1)

*The fog comes  
Like wolf from dark.  
It sits looking  
Through our poor soul  
On silent haunches  
Getting ready to howl.*

(2)

*The fog comes  
Hissing as a snake.  
It sits looking  
Into the human's face  
On silent haunches  
Moving with a slow pace.*

These micro-texts exemplify the ways in which students invented complex figures, produced meaning and materialized the images while voicing them in words.

### **Step 3: Peer review of the produced poems**

After students composed their poems, they were asked to exchange the produced versions with their peers in the group. The exchange allowed them to: a) get an insight into the texts composed by their classmates; b) give constructive feedback and c) get a sense of audience different from the teacher.

The students had to agree on one suitable version of the poem in their groups and then by reading it aloud they exchanged their poems with other groups justifying their decisions. In order to justify their opinions the students had to pay attention to the following questions:

- Did the writer manage to present his/her creative ideas in appropriate language?

- Did the writer manage to create meaning and engage the audience?
- Did the poem represent the author's skills to experiment with language creatively?

The answers to those three questions in the peer review activity raised students' awareness of the language of poems (metaphors, similes, rich spectrum of epithets, rhyme, verbs denoting activities, types of movement among others) and of the ways in which ideas are shaped in poetry.

#### **Step 4: Comparing and contrasting the original (revising the produced poems)**

The peer review activity was followed by an activity in which students were given the original poem and asked to compare their own versions with it. the questions to which they had to answer were:

- What is the metaphor used by the poet as a comparison to the fog?
- What is the similarity or point of comparison between the two objects?
- What do you think is the poet's purpose in describing the scene?

The purpose of this task is to allow students to evaluate the quality of the produced poems and to raise their awareness of the fact that each poet has his/her own poetic style which is a reflection of his/her inner world, perceptions, self-exploration and ability to play with language. While analyzing their own poems in the light of the original, L2 learners were given a chance to focus on both the content and the linguistic expression of the ideas of the author. In the end they were asked to decide which version of the produced ones was more accurate and to support their opinion with arguments.

#### **Step 5: Producing own poems**

Having worked with the original text, students in each group were encouraged to produce their own poems using the following words: *the sun, the moon, the star, the rain* or abstract notions such as: *love, fame, hope, friendship*, etc. The structure of the new poems had to resemble the one of the 'Fog' poem. Although L2 students had produced structurally similar poems in the previous step, the task caused some difficulty as they had to think of the figures they could present in the poems, of the images and associations these figures would

produce to the audience, of the vocabulary they could use to describe the imagery.

All created poems were shared and discussed by the students. The beginner poets were satisfied with their works which were simple but very vivid examples of their imagination, of their knowledge of the target language and of their faculty to construct ideas through various linguistic forms and means of expression.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

As noted earlier, the writing task presented in this paper exemplifies how the poems can offer excellent opportunities to conduct activities in language classes through a balanced, product-oriented approach of writing taking into account genre awareness and all the steps of writing process: pre-writing, drafting, peer review and revising.

On the basis of self-reflection, peer and student feedback analysis, we can claim that the use of poems in the language class with a bit of imagination and flexibility produces excellent results. The process of creative writing is like breathing fresh air which takes a writer through a long journey of floating ideas. It gives the writer an opportunity to think critically and pour out his or her own feelings and emotions in intra and inter personal universes.

During the stage of writing the students are stimulated and motivated to develop not only their writing skills but their critical approach skills as well. In addition to developing productive skills and learning to work cooperatively, using poems in classrooms advances students' creative and critical literacy. When writing about the relevant and interesting topics to students, they tend to be apt to responding enthusiastically to craft a piece of writing. Through analysing and commenting on peers' work, students develop the ability to read their own piece of writing critically which lets them develop argumentative and interpretative skills on the basis of self-evaluation process. It should now be obvious that EFL teachers need to be aware of usefulness of including creative writing teaching elements into the course designing a syllabus for writing as an academic discipline.

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