

# Creative writing as an important tool in second language acquisition and practice

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Creative Writing is rarely included in the curricula of English language learners in Japanese higher and further education. However, students' creative use of language, in particular in literary writing, may serve as an aid to certain aspects of language acquisition (particularly grammar and certain kinds of vocabulary), as well as address issues of communicative competence as English L2 learners move beyond the beginner stage of acquisition. Such tasks also appear to be motivating. This paper uses examples from texts and classroom activities to show how asking second language students to attempt poetry and fiction can contribute to central parts of their learning.

## Introduction

In the 1887 *Unua Libro* ("First Book"), L.L. Zamenhof offered as examples of texts in his new language of Esperanto (in addition to some biblical translations and a letter) three poems, two of which were original. In developing the language, he had translated works of literature (poetry and prose) to ascertain the completeness of his new creation, and in later life he devoted much time to translating other works of literature. The first book in Esperanto by an author other than Zamenhof was a poetry anthology; within just over 20 years of Zamenhof introducing his creation, people had published original novels, songs and plays in this new language. Output, whether original or in translation, was largely literary.

This case is interesting because the producers of these works were quite clearly intrinsically motivated language learners. The noted Esperantist Donald Harlow (1995) asked "Why do Esperantists dedicate so much time, money and effort to such an essentially non-productive pastime as literature when they could be more effectively devoting it to the promulgation of Esperanto?" His answer was that "It is the nature of languages to produce literatures".

There is, in foreign language education, a

paradox when it comes to texts. Among the most valued texts in any language are creative works. Mass consumption of "texts" is dominated by them: films, books (including manga), and songs. When we give students extensive reading, we recommend graded readers that are overwhelmingly fiction. Yet when EFL teachers ask students to produce written work, they usually ask for well-organised facts and explicit opinions: descriptions, essays, reports. They very rarely ask for expressive or creative output, if ever. There are vanishingly few textbooks available for teaching or encouraging foreign language students to write stories, songs and poems in their target language.

The usual defence of this situation is instrumental: students don't need to know how to write songs, poems or stories. On the other hand, the ability to express and support one's ideas in a well-organised and comprehensible manner is an important professional and academic skill. The clear implication is that (compulsory) curriculum time should be devoted to activities directly relevant to archetypal "real-world" work- or study-related usage.

However, does this position accurately reflect the potential usefulness of creative writing for a language

learner, or indeed the actual needs of students? Using examples from creative writing courses, this paper challenges the presumption that creative writing lacks relevance in a serious EFL curriculum. In particular, it argues that the study and practice of creative forms (learning the “craft”) is particularly beneficial, and that the human tendency to produce literature – even in a foreign language – should be acknowledged and harnessed in foreign language education.

**The Contribution of Creative Writing to Language Acquisition**  
**Making Focus on Form and Rhythm a Meaningful Task**

One of the challenges in using communicative and task-based methods in the classroom is how to manage focus on form, often contrasted with a focus on meaning (e.g. Littlewood, 2004). The study of grammar is problematic: it can be inauthentic, controlling and non-communicative, and for some writers, the prescription of specific forms as part of a lesson or curriculum plan, rather than as a reactive, mid-task activity, is frowned upon (e.g. Long, 2000).

However, creative writing, in particular poetry, provides a means of combining meaning-focused and form-focused tasks. With the exception of freeform verse, poetry involves paying attention to meter, form, repetition and shape. Holmes and Moulton (2001) have shown how the use of pattern poetry allows students to perform tasks that, by having a prescribed format, allow for meaningful, authentic use of teacher-specified forms. The students are given a stable vehicle through which they can express themselves. The response from students can be impressive:

“With the very first poems our students wrote, we knew we were onto something special. Not only were our students practicing the structures we wanted them to, but they were also engaged and enthusiastic about the process. And the poems they wrote were little jewels!” (2001:1)

Here is one example of a task they give to

students that focuses on relative clauses using who and adjectives. Note that like most tasks presented here, it can be attempted by low level students.

- Line 1: First name
- Line 2: Four traits that describe the character
- Line 3: Relative of \_\_\_\_\_ (brother, sister, daughter etc.)
- Line 4: Lover of \_\_\_\_\_ (list three people, things or ideas)
- Line 5: Who feels (three emotions)
- Line 6: Who needs (three items)
- Line 7: Who fears (three items)
- Line 8: Who gives (three items)
- Line 9: Who would like to see \_\_\_\_\_ (three items)
- Line 10: Resident of \_\_\_\_\_
- Line 11: Last name

And here is one of the results, by three children (Karla, Moses and Joel) aged 15-16

*Rose*  
*Colorful, aromatic, pretty*  
*Sister to gardenias, sunflowers, and daisies*  
*Lover of parties, weddings and dates*  
*Who feels warm in the sun, hurt when cut, and satisfied when it rains*  
*Who needs water, sun, and dirt*  
*Who fears drought, chemicals and scissors*  
*Who gives love, happiness, and peace*  
*Who would like to see all people happy*  
*Resident of beautiful gardens*  
*Linda*

(Holmes and Moulton, 2001, p. 52)

Notice that the students do not feel limited to giving regulation answers, and that they are still engaged in using other language for the task – such as connecting clauses with “when”. Holmes and Moulton’s book is full of similar student-written examples.

Through poetry, creative writing can also help with pronunciation. In the Japanese context, students are sometimes asked to write haiku in English to

focus on what counts as a “syllable”. Many Japanese speakers can struggle at first to distinguish between the Japanese moraic rendering of English words in katakana from their syllable-based pronunciation in English, where consonants can run together and syllables can end in consonants (Wells, 2000). For example, the one syllable word “stress” is rendered as four morae: su-to-re-su. This may be a particular problem with English loan words in Japanese where students may defer to L1 pronunciation. Writing haiku encourages students’ awareness of the syllabic character of English pronunciation. Here are two examples from low-intermediate students at a Japanese university from a creative writing course run by the author. Again, notice the humour as the students respond to the task.

*I’ll show you my poem.  
You might be disappointed  
‘Coz I can’t write well.*  
Fumina Nakashima

*I love many sports  
I don’t do any sports now  
Oh! I will be fat.*  
Ayaka Iwamura

In the creative writing course referred to above, writing Haiku was the first stage in raising awareness of word stress and stress-timing in English. The next stage was writing in a regular meter – in this particular case, in iambic pentameter. In doing such exercises, students need to bring attention to the stress patterns in words (including secondary stresses), and are made aware of the general significance of stress-based rhythm in English. The advantage of approaching these exercises as attempts to write poetry is that the students seem ready to combine a focus on form (in this case stress patterns) with attempts to create meaning and communicate ideas. In his guide to poetry-writing, Fry (2006) suggests that simply following a certain meter (in the example below, iambic pentameter) can result in aesthetically pleasing work simply after a few sentences of trying. This seems to be true for L2 learners too. The following example, while with errors and not perfectly matching the

meter, is from the same creative writing course:

*When I was very little in the past,  
I believed that there was Santa in the sky  
I was excited on the Christmas day,  
because he comes and gives me what I want.  
In morning I get up and find a gift.  
Then I had very wonderful feelings.  
When I have darling children at someday  
I want to be a Santa Claus for them*  
Hitomi Kitamura

It is notable how many students try to be interesting, thought-provoking, moving or funny. The anecdotal evidence from writers such as Holmes and Moulton, Al-Jarf (2007), and my own classes is that students do make an attempt to communicate through these exercises.

#### **Non-Core and Emotional Vocabulary: Acquisition and Practice**

Carter (1998) distinguishes between core and non-core vocabulary items. The former are words which are neutral, or “unmarked” – *eat, big, door* etc., and which act as universal substitutes for their non-core synonyms. The latter carry nuances, extra meanings – *guzzle, ginormous, portal*. Because non-core vocabulary often have cultural connotations that may be lost in word-for-word translations, they present a problem for low to intermediate students seeking to improve their active vocabulary. Why would a student use the word “furious” when the simple circumlocution “very angry” is available?

Attempting fiction, where the aesthetic quality of the writing is a central component, provides an excellent setting for non-core vocabulary study. It encourages both raising cognitive awareness of non-core vocabulary, and provides reasons for using it. Where the emotional impact (rather than simple semantic message) becomes important, so does the nuance in word choice. Figure 1 presents an example of an exercise taken from a course in story-writing taught by the author. It is designed to raise awareness of non-core words synonymous with “look”.



Answer the following questions – use your imagination!

1. John stared at Peter. Why?  
Peter had walked into the room wearing a gorilla costume.

2. Peter gazed at Catherine. Why?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. Catherine glared at Sophie. Why?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Stephen glanced at Helen. Why?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Helen frowned at Susan. Why?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. Susan smiled at John. Why?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Figure 1. Example of a worksheet used to raise student awareness of non-core words (Smith, 2012, p. 39)

The results can be impressive, as students’ sensitivity to reaching for the “right” word seems to increase, leading them to investigate synonyms and improve their dictionary use. I have found that the vocabulary use in fiction writing appears to be more varied and of higher quality than academic writing produced by the same students. Good collocations appear unbidden: for example, one student begins to write how people are *occupied* by thoughts, while another has an animal’s tail *wagging*. Some reach deep into the dictionary: A student writes how his main character “*awoke to a silky, orotund voice*”.

It is not simply non-core vocabulary in general that needs attention. Dewaele and Pavlenko (2002) show how the conceptual maps implied by emotional and expressive vocabulary are different across different languages. The interrelationship between language

and emotions can even be witnessed in psychological tests: in Veltkamp, Recio, Jacobs and Conrad (2012), two groups of Spanish L1/German L2 and German L1/Spanish L2 speakers on a personality assessment scored higher for “agreeability” when they took the test in German and higher for “extraversion” and “neuroticism” when the test was in Spanish. There is also evidence that emotional vocabulary is processed differently to concrete and abstract vocabulary, and they present a particular challenge to L2 learners (Altarriba and Basnight-Brown, 2011). One aspect of this challenge is the psychological “depth” of encoding of emotional concepts in the first language, found even in bilinguals whose “second” language was learned after the age of eight.

The active exploration of emotions in L2 is well-suited to fiction and poetry writing. These are safer media both for the student and the teacher. For example, expressing feelings of rejection or loss may be traumatic; students can be empowered by language if instead they are allowed to write a fictionalized story – the one that they want to tell. (In one of my first story-writing courses a student confessed that the high-school love triangle story she had written was based on her own life, except that “only this time I won!”) Finding an emotional voice in the second language appears to be part of mastering that language.

## The Relevance of “Literary” Language in Real-World Language Use

### Language Play and Relationship Building

As several authors have noted, “language play” is an integral part of language use, especially in relationship building, both in L1 adults (Carter 2004) and L2 learners (Belz and Reinhart, 2004). Carter’s corpus research shows how the use of rhymes, repeated patterns, puns, morphological inventiveness (“undancerly”, “finelyish”), jokey deconstruction of idioms etc. serve as a common means of building intimacy and trust. That is, everyday speech is “pervasively artful”, with language play serving to “bring people together and membershiping them inclusively” (Carter, 2004:108). According to Cook, language play constitutes “a large proportion

of personally and socially significant language use” (2000: 204)

Many of these techniques do not come naturally to Japanese learners of English. As a case in point, rhyme is a particular challenge. Japanese songs, with the exception of rap music, typically do not employ rhyme. In my own classes, students struggle to focus on the sound rather than orthography. In awareness-raising exercises such as finding rhyming pairs, many choose similar spellings (*stone – gone*) or beginnings (*strike – stroll*), while struggling when words of different syllable counts still rhyme (*court – report*). It is notable that in the recent NHK Educational show *Angela Aki no English Song Book*, in which the singer explains to a Japanese audience the meaning of English lyrics, she typically does not mention the rhyme or meter pattern. This is even where an

unusual word choice or sentence structure has clearly been dictated by the demands of rhyme and scansion, and even though rhyme and rhythm are central aesthetic characteristics of English. Such things have been excluded from the English curriculum in Japan.

*I was sleepy so I went to bed.  
Then I slipped  
And I hit my head.  
Ayaka Yamamoto*

If language play is part of social interaction, is it right that we have able students graduating as English majors who don't understand (let alone know) how to rhyme or scan? Who don't even appreciate that punning and alliteration are common currencies of social interaction?



*Change the statements into ones that show someone's feelings rather than tell the reader directly.*

### *Telling*

### *Showing*

Lucy's mother was very angry with her.	<i>Lucy's mother stared at her with cold eyes.</i>
Terence hated John, because he was also in love with Lucy.	<i>Terence's fists tightened as he saw Lucy, Lucy, Lucy, holding hands with that fat idiot, John.</i>
Lucy missed her father a lot.	<i>Lucy still kept her father's old walking stick in the umbrella stand by the door.</i>
Lucy was very scared of big dogs .	
Lucy didn't like Anna.	
Lucy's favourite food was ice cream.	
Lucy's French lessons were always boring.	
Lucy got very upset when she was told that her pet hamster had died.	

*Figure 2.* Example of a worksheet where students need to transform literal descriptions into actions (Smith, 2012, p. 24)

## **Sociocultural Competence and Linguistic Proficiency**

Dewaele and Pavlenko (2002) state that a commonly reported difficulty for intermediate level students is the inability “to express their communicative intentions accurately”, and that “this inability is mostly due to problems at the level of associative aspect of lexical competence, i.e., to a limited ability to perceive and use subtle stylistic nuances”(2002: 270). For example, intermediate speakers usually employ direct descriptions of emotions, while figurative speech indicates higher language competence. That is, for students hoping to spend time abroad, a focus on techniques in expressive language will help them to thrive in their second language environment. Littlemore and Low also highlight in particular how metaphoric competence contributes, amongst other language learning goals, to “sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. (2006: 268)

Associative and figurative language, with the ability to express nuance, are central to creative, particularly literary writing. Both the form (e.g. similes with *like, as* etc.) and the purpose (the impact of showing/comparing rather than literally re-telling) of such techniques can be taught and practiced through encouraging students to write literary-style pieces. Figure 2 shows a simple exercise from my story writing class where students need to transform literal descriptions into actions. Students are guided to “show” the emotions of actors to achieve a greater emotional impact.

Such tasks empower students to employ examples for emotional effect in their stories. In a recent class, a high-beginner student describes a bullied character: “Textbooks written with the name Fumiya were thrown into a garbage can and his shoes were hidden every day”. Another student sums up a 7-year-old child missing his father: “Veg sometimes draws his

father’s imaginary face”. These examples provides a richer, more nuanced means of expression than the direct expression of an emotion.

## **Conclusion: Creative Writing as a Suitable Classroom Task**

I referred at the start to the “instrumental defence” for the exclusion of creative writing from core curricula – that creative writing serves no practical use for students. This defence produces a corollary paradox to the paradox of literary texts in EFL: the problems of extrinsic motivation in language study are well-known, yet extrinsic rewards are cited not only quite reasonably as a justification for focusing on certain activities, but also implicitly as a necessary characteristic of worthwhile language tasks.

I hope to have shown that both the belief that creative writing cannot serve practical language learning purposes, and the implicit belief that creative and expressive use of language is of little importance to language learners, are invalid. By providing opportunities to focus on form in a meaningful manner, and opportunities to investigate and use more difficult vocabulary and more impactful forms of expression, creative writing tasks can contribute to central challenges in language learning.

I also hope also to have indicated the advantage of creative writing in terms of motivation. Students respond positively to creative writing tasks. While poems, stories and songs may begin as externally motivated tasks set by the teacher, it is my experience that the innate human drive to expression and playfulness in language, that is, to literary expression, frequently takes over. Students write with more care, dedication and – in my experience with stories – often far greater output. I believe we should embrace this aspect of human nature. Instead of excessive and unwarranted concern about its usefulness, we should include more creative writing in our curricula.

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Understanding these differences in starting points is important because it provides a possible explanation for the conflicting methodologies and conclusions of various reviews on this topic (e.g., Ferris, 2003, 2004; Truscott, 1996, 2007). This article briefly traces the history of these two parallel lines of research on written CF and notes both contrasts and convergences. It then moves to a focused discussion of the possible implications and applications of this body of work for the L2 language and writing classroom and for future research efforts.Â

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