Evaluating ESL Students' Creativity in Writing

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Abstract: Writing as a productive skill isan integral part of the language-learning process. However, students do not consider writing an easy skill to learn and many ESL teachers certainly consider it a difficult skill to teach.Creative writing normally refers to the production of texts that have an aesthetic rather than a purely informative, instrumental or pragmatic purpose. Creative writing in ESL classes has started developing lately, but only to be incorporated as a supportive skill in teaching writing.Responding to students' writing is an important issue to discuss when considering teaching creative writing. Response is a process that includes peer review, peer editing and continuous feedback through the stages of creative writing. By providing constructive feedback, the teacherunderstandsa writer's problems and intentions by making students responsible for finding and analyzing what needs to be improved.

Introduction

Writing as a productive skill is an integral partof the language-learning process.However, students do not consider writing an easy skill to learn and many ESL teachers certainly consider it a difficult skill to teach.According to Reid (1993), many ESL teachers only used writing as a skill to support language learning. This assumption led them to think that writing could be useful as a technique for adding interest or as a testing device for assessing grammar errors. Nowadays, writing has become an important communicative skill as a result of researchin this field. ESL teachers have come to recognize writing as a skill that is equal to other integral language-learning skills and many of them have investigated different approaches to writing.

The importance of writing in EFL classes

Like speaking, writing is a key to academic language success**.**From an early age, students acquire second languagesthrough words, and thencontinuing with sentences, paragraphs and longer papers.They encounter difficulties because most students find it hard to express ideas even though they have basic language knowledge. When taking on a writing assignment, students have little confidence, which leads to different preconceptions and stereotypes about writing. This problem has been a topic for discussion among many language teachers and researchers due to the great importance of writing in language learning. "Each time I am assigned a paper I stuck in my breathas if I had to move a hundred-pound stone from the entrance to my apartment in order to go on living" (Bishop, W., 1990, p.26).Anxiety makes students reluctant to engage themselves in the writing process. The fear of not doing everything right makes them step back and teachers miss out on what students really know. If students are free to express themselves, teachers will be able to see what they know and what they need to learn in order to improve.

There are many contradictory opinions on whether controlled instruction should be the prevalent method for teaching writing or ifcreative writing techniques should take over. A group of researchers would prefer to use them interchangeably even though they might prefer one to the other. Having looked at different researchers' views in this area of study, we teachers can decide to choose which instruction methodis the most useful and fruitful in teaching writing. It is crucial to bear in mind what writing really is and how we can enhance learning through the instruction of writing. "The view of writing as a tool for learning and not just a means to demonstrate learning is one of the major contributions of the research into the writing process" (Elbow, 1998). Therefore, if students are given the opportunity to use the target language in

order to build their capacities to write, they will surely acquire the language at the same time.

Defining creativity in writing

The traditional approaches to writing have had a great impact on both teachers' and students' beliefs about how to teach and learn writing. Despite the fact that many researchers have reported positive results from usingcreative writing techniques, many teachers have been reluctant to adoptthis method in the classroom. It must be noted that creative writing existed in theory long before it started to be used in practice. Considering that creative writing differs in many ways from traditional methods of teaching writing, it has been considered a challenge and an unfamiliar method that does not take into account important elements such as accuracy and precision.

The movement from controlled to free or guided writing started in the early 1980s when teachers decided to embrace this new methodology (Reid, 1993).Creative writingas a writing methodology is characterized by the free expression of thoughts and ideas in a supportive and constructive classroom environment. It is also referred to as expressive or creative writing. This approach focuses on enhancing students' ability to express their creativity and to genuinely practice writing in an anxiety-free atmosphere. Techniques that demonstrate the above-mentioned characteristics of creative writing include: writing a paragraph by describing a person or a place; writing a short story; writing an informal letter to a friend or a report about something you have read; writing about a given topic; and writing by describing a picture. Moreover, there have also been discussions about creative writingas a way of boosting critical thinking. Major (1994) has argued that creative writing activities actually improve critical thinking since they are based on students' personal and emotional state, which gives them a sense of motivation. Elbow (1998) also supports the use of creative writing by giving arguments for its general application and even recommending it for freshman writing courses, saying that students "need to practice nonacademic writing".

Evaluating creativity in writing

"Feedback has long been regarded as essential for the development of second language (L2) writing skills, both for its potential for learning and for student motivation."(Hyland, K. & Hyland, F., 2006, p.83). Giving the wrong feedback may discourage students' progress in creativity and decrease their creativity. Responding to students' writingshould be seen as a process in itself and proper attention should be given to its importance in their language-learning progress. In most cases, a piece of writing is analyzed as a final product and the main focus is on error correction.

However, language teachers face a permanent question: Does error correction always help to improve students' writing in L2? "One line of argument, influenced by process theories, claims that feedback on error to L2 students is discouraging and generally fails to produce any improvements in their subsequent writing."(Hyland, K. & Hyland, F., 2006, p.84). However, a considerable number of researchers claim the opposite.

Feedback is considered a much more difficultapproach to evaluating creative writing.This is because an idea that one person considers creative may not be seen as such by another person. Another problem in measuring creativity is avoiding subjectivity and choosing the right criteria. "Self-report measures of creativity and global assessments of students' creativity by others (such as teachers) have also failed to demonstrate sufficient validity to be trusted for most uses." (Baer, J. & Mc Kool, Sh., 2009, p.2)

Giving feedback on creative writing is thought to be very difficult since not everyone rates creativity in the same way. In addition, it is human nature to render judgments based on feelings, and a work that changespeople's feelings is considered worthier.To better illustrate this idea, Kaufman, Christopher & Kaufman, (2008) claim:

> It may be the case, then, that we make judgments of a set of work based upon the pieces that made us 'feel' the most. If we attach an emotion to a piece of poetry, then we should be able to remember that piece better and, further, to use it as an anchor for our judgments of other works by that artist. (p. 3).

What to focus on when giving feedback on creative writing? Thisis the hardest part for language teachers. Creative writing positively affects language expression through writing, which leads to a better general performance in that language. Students need to have access to this writing approach, which seeks to be aesthetic and at the same time offers relaxation for both the reader and writer. Whether approached in a traditional way or in a contemporary one, the teachers' main aim should be to help their students progress in their language learning. With a lot of care, they should offer feedback so that students can see their strengths and errors and continue striving for optimal performance.

The research

This study was conducted among 25third-year students at the English department at South East European University in Tetovo. Participantswere givenassignments such
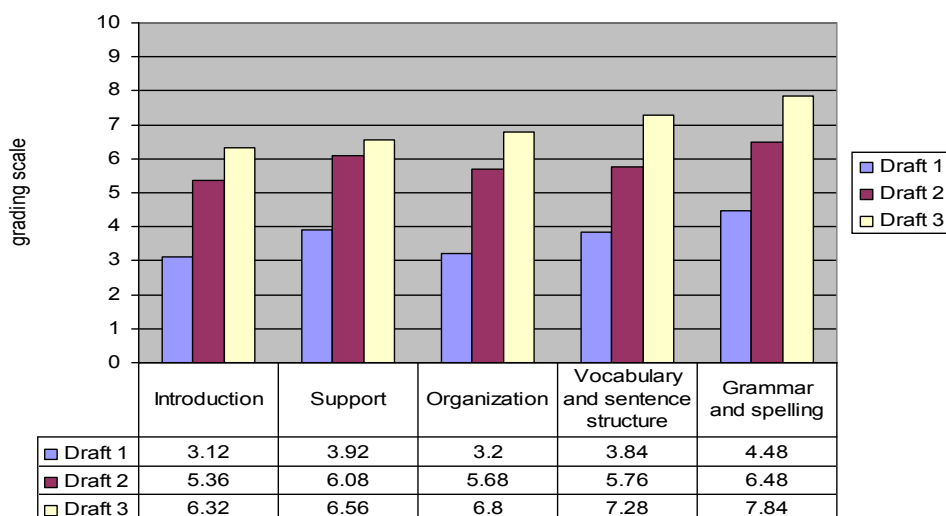
as writing a letter, writing a short story, writing by using pictures, etc. All of the in-class activities mentioned above were used according to creative writing techniques and no error correction was provided. The teacher's role during the course of these activities was to be an observer, a supporter and a guide or a prompter. Students received more peer feedback rather than teacher feedback during the in-class activities. As a result of their group and peer work, students were giving comments to each other related to the structure of ideas and the choice of vocabulary. Students received feedback from the teacher after they read what they had written. The teacher feedback included appraisal for the good and strong points of the writing task and suggestions for improvement on the weaker points. It did not include error correction or correction related to mechanics. The students were evaluated ontheir progress in the following categories: Introduction, support, organization, vocabulary and sentence structure, and grammar and spelling.

Students' assignments were collected every week. After each class the students received feedback from the teacherbased upon the following criteria:

Table 1. Evaluation criteria adopted from 'The HOT Writing Rubric' developed by Project Zero at Harvard University and by the Composition Program at the University of California, Irvine.

Criteria	5	4	3	2	1	0
Creative Writing	Excellent use of imagery; similes; vivid, detailed descriptions; figurative language; puns; wordplay; metaphor; irony. Surprises the reader with unusual associations, breaks conventions, and thwarts expectations.	Some startling images, a few stunning associative leaps with a weak conclusion or lesser, more ordinary images and comparisons. Inconsistent.	Sentimental, predictable, or cliché.	Borrows ideas or images from popular culture in an unreflective way.	Cursory response. Obvious lack of motivation and/or poor understanding of the assignment.	No response.

All three drafts submitted by the students were analyzed according to the analytic scale in order to tracktheir progress through the workshop. Detailed results from drafts are shown in Figure 1. The following figures will show students' progress throughout the drafts in five categories as separate units and throughout drafts as whole essays.

Chart 1: Draft results for all five categories

	Introduction	Support	Organization	Vocabulary and sentence structure	Grammar and spelling
□ Draft 1	3.12	3.92	3.2	3.84	4.48
■ Draft 2	5.36	6.08	5.68	5.76	6.48
□ Draft 3	6.32	6.56	6.8	7.28	7.84

As shown in Figure 1, students' introductions scored an average of 3.12 inthe first draft. In the second draft, the average score improved to 5.36. Students showed additional progress in the third draft, with the average score rising to 6.32. In other words, the writers made significant progress between their first and second drafts, with the average score improving by 2.24, whereas the improvement between the second and third drafts was slighter at about 0.96. The overall average increase from the first to the thirddraft was 3.2.

In the category of support, students' performance in writing the first draft was evaluated at an average of 3.92 out of 10. Students' ability to support their essays improved significantlyby the second draft, where they scored an average of 6.08. However, their progress slowed between the second and third drafts, where the average score was 6.56. In other words, the average score rose 2.16 points between the first and second drafts, while the improvementbetween the second and third draftswas just 0.48. Even though the progress between the second and third draftswas not significant, it must be noted that the difference between the first and third drafts was 2.64, which is a considerable success.

In the category of organization, students scored an average of 3.2 in the first draft. The second draft showed a considerable difference, with the average rising to 6.68. A slighter difference was detected between the second and third drafts, where the average score was 6.8. Nevertheless, students' progress in organizing their essays from the first draft to the second showed a very significant difference of 2.48, while

the third draft improved on the secondby just 1.12. It should also be noted that in all three categories discussed so far, students made greater progress between their first and the second drafts than between their second and third drafts. In the organization category, total progress between the first and third draftswas 3.6, which is higher than the total improvement in the first two categories, especially support.

Vocabulary and sentence structure is the fourth category that was analyzed in the three student drafts. In the first draft, students' performance with respect to the vocabulary they used and their sentencestructure resulted in an average of 3.84. The second draft showed an average increase to 5.76, while the students' average scores rose to 7.28 in the third draft. In this category, students' progress between the three drafts was more equal than in the first three categories. There was a difference of 1.92 between the first and the second draft, while the progress between the second and the third drafts showed a difference of 1.52. The overall progress from the first draft to the last one in this category was 3.68, slightly higher than the total progress in the organization category.

The fifth category, grammar and spelling,presented the following outcomes:The average score in the first draft was 4.48 – the highest first-draft average in all five categories. The average scoresin the second and the third draftswere 6.48 and 7.84, respectively. The difference between the first and second draft was 2 points, whereas the difference between the second and the third drafts was 1.36. Overall, students' scores improved by 3.36 points between the first and third drafts, which is approximately the same as theirrate of progress in the introduction category.

Conclusions

The findings of this research not only reflect the expected outcomes,but also provide insight into some interesting points with respect to writing instruction. Research on students' progress in writing has been an issue for decades and has covered many important aspects of writing. The interpretation of the findings is similar to the results of some research projects, but different from others. This may reflect the different nature of the sample that each researcher uses.

The results of this research point toa need for other related studies. If EFL students respond positively to creative writing instruction, it would be interesting to find out whether adult students of English as a foreign language respond in a similar manner. Other in-depth investigations into feedback and its effects on language learningmightprovide more interesting insights on the proper way to respond to student writing.
Teachers and educators should practice creative writing so that students can produce a 'self work'.

The outcomes of teaching creative writing are enormous for language learners. In addition to practicing new vocabulary, students practice structure deductively and at the same time concentrate on the content.

Writing drafts and peer feedback are closely connected to the final evaluation. Teachers have the main say when evaluating creative writing. Using an evaluation chart is helpful both for the teacher and the student writer.

This study answers several questions. Clearly, creative writing makes students better writers. This does not mean that students who practice creative writing are able to do well in other writing approaches, but it helps in creating writing habits.
Creative writing is also an approach to writing that finds a good place in literature.Creative writing, also known as a poetic or artistic writing, can help students become better writers.

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