

The Role of Creative Writing in Teaching English

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Creative writing is writing about events in an imaginative way. Novels, plays, short stories and poems are some examples of creative writing. We often think creative writing can only be done by “experts” - that is, poets, playwrights and novelists. Interestingly, however, creative writing can actually be cultivated through classroom writing activities. Students learn to write creatively by reading and analyzing the works of experienced writers and by writing stories, poems or plays of their own. This helps them to acquire both the language (vocabulary and structures) and narrative skills (making an interesting beginning, using dialogue skillfully, weaving in contemporary, everyday events to sound more natural, etc.) that they need.

A course in Creative Writing can do many things. It can give students opportunities for self-expression and catharsis. It can allow them to record emotions in words and explore human interactions and the workings of the human psyche. It can also provide nuanced ways of sending messages.

A creative writer often gives his or her readers pictures to see, sounds to hear, or things to taste, feel and smell. Note that creative writers look for words that help us to see and hear what they have seen, heard or imagined. A writer can tell us about the things he or she has seen or imagined by using descriptive words such as shining, narrow, huge, small, glowing, etc. He or she may also use phrases or expressions like the road was a ribbon of moonlight, the wind was a torrent of darkness, his heart was jumping, etc. Expressions like these are called figures of speech.

Creative writing sharpens students’ ability to express their thoughts clearly. It encourages them to think beyond the ordinary, and to use their imagination to express their ideas in their own way. Learning about creative writing also makes students familiar with literary terms and mechanisms such as sound patterns or metaphors. This, in turn, can help students to improve their command over the resources of language - for example, vocabulary, sentence patterns and metaphorical expressions - when composing their own creative work.

It has also been argued that creative writing helps develop critical thinking skills, as

students learn to question and to “think outside the box.” The ability to evaluate a piece of literary work improves students’ problem-solving abilities too.

The teaching of creative writing basically focuses on students’ self-expression. It is taught by taking students through a series of steps that demonstrate the *process* of writing. As a first step, students are introduced to a range of fictional and non-fictional texts, with their attention being drawn to the distinctive structural and linguistic features of each text. They are also sensitised to the *purpose*, *audience* and *context* for which specific texts are written. The students are then given practice in the use of linkers, connectives and other semantic markers that are used to connect and present ideas logically in a text. Typical semantic markers in narrative texts are words such as *because*, *although*, *when*, *where*, *since* and so on; they perform various functions in the text, such as showing time relationships, cause and effect relationships, conditions, sequence of events and so on. The students are then gradually taught to dramatize events by: establishing a landscape or context, developing dialogues, establishing characters using descriptions of appearance, mannerisms, etc., and developing an appropriate vocabulary (e.g., formal versus informal words and phrases, colloquial terms, terms of endearment).

Lastly, students are helped to express more complex and layered meanings in stories that: combine outside events with personal experiences; dramatize inner feelings, and contain reflections and commentary.

Creative writing usually includes **descriptive**, **expository**, **narrative** and **argumentative** texts.

In a **descriptive** text, a writer gives his or her readers pictures to see, sounds to hear, and things to taste, feel and smell. **Expository** writing defines, explains or describes how something is done or how something happens. A **narrative** describes an event chronologically, usually with a beginning, middle and end. An **argument** is intended to convince others of something or to persuade them to do something.

Creative writing can be both fun and rewarding. It gives you the chance to get creative and use your imagination in a positive way - hopefully by producing something that allows you to escape to somewhere new. Writing in this way is open to experimentation, although there are some basic guidelines you should follow to produce the best creative piece you can.

Look for inspiration - Practically any object, person or place can be used as inspiration for your piece. Even pieces of music can get your thinking juices flowing - giving you the chance to create something unique and special. Even if you don't intend on getting your worked

published, it's still great fun to explore different thoughts and ideas.

Have patience - Even the greatest authors start off small - with one or two ideas as the basis of their creative writing piece - so you shouldn't be too critical of yourself. You will probably pick up new ideas that you can combine with your initial thoughts to make something worthwhile eventually, but this process does take time.

Re-visit your piece regularly - You may already know from reading novels that it is very difficult to restart halfway through a book after a period spent away from it. Generally, this rule applies to creative writing, and you can get 'rusty' and lose your passion for the piece after a time without returning to it.

Even if you only have 15 minutes a day, this is better than nothing. Try and keep the themes fresh in your mind, even if you don't add anything.

Don't be scared - If you get an idea but feel unsure about it: write it down anyway. You can always get rid of it eventually if you're 100% certain you don't want it in your creative work, but there's nothing worse than omitting something and then wanting it back, as you may be unable to recall exactly what it was.

If there's no time limit, don't make one! If there's no deadline for finalizing your work, avoid implementing one: this will only make things stressful. There is an art to writing creatively, and it should be enjoyed. Take your time and give your thoughts chance to mature before using them.

Re-read, re-read, re-read - Read it over again. And again. And again. No matter how many times you read your creative work, you are likely to make changes for the better. It's of key importance to look over your piece, delete parts, add bits here and there, and check your grammar, spelling and punctuation. If you wish for it to be published and you don't manage to the first time around, don't scrap it straight away; see what modifications you can make, and you may strike the jackpot next time, or the time after!

The above guidelines should be loosely adhered to in order to be successful when writing in a creative style. Improvise when you feel this is suitable, but try and work in concordance with these simple rules when you can - they should help you on the road to success.

Creative writing aids language development at all levels: grammar, vocabulary, phonology and discourse. It requires learners to manipulate the language in interesting and demanding ways in attempting to express uniquely personal meanings. In doing so, they

necessarily engage with the language at a deeper level of processing than with most expository texts. (Craik and Lockhart, 1972) The gains in grammatical accuracy and range, in the appropriacy and originality of lexical choice, in sensitivity to rhyme, rhythm, stress and intonation, and in the way texts hang together are significant.

A key characteristic of creative writing is a willingness to play with the language. In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in the role of play in language acquisition. (Carter 2004, Cook 2000, Crystal, 1998) In some ways, the tsunami of the Communicative Approach has done a disservice to language teaching by its insistence on the purely communicative functions of language. Proponents of ‘play’ point out, rightly, that in L1 acquisition, much of the language encountered by and used by children is in the form of rhythmical chants and rhymes, word games, jokes and the like. Furthermore, such playfulness survives into adulthood, so that many social encounters are characterized by language play (punning, spontaneous jokes, ‘funny voices’, metathesis, and a discourse which is shaped by quasi-poetic repetition (Tannen, 1989). These are precisely the kinds of things L2 learners are encouraged to do in creative writing activities. This playful element encourages them to play creatively with the language and in so doing, to take the risks without which learning cannot take place in any profound sense. As Crystal (1998) states, ‘Reading and writing do not have to be a prison house. Release is possible. And maybe language play can provide the key.’

Much of the teaching we do tends to focus on the left side of the brain, where our logical faculties are said to reside. Creative writing puts the emphasis on the right side of the brain, with a focus on feelings, physical sensations, intuition and musicality. This is a healthy restoration of the balance between logical and intuitive faculties. It also affords scope for learners whose hemisphere dominance or learning-style preferences may not be intellectual or left brain dominant, and who, in the normal process of teaching are therefore at a disadvantage.

Perhaps most notable is the dramatic increase in self-confidence and self-esteem which creative writing tends to develop among learners. Learners also tend to discover things for themselves about the language... and about themselves too, thus promoting personal as well as linguistic growth. Inevitably, these gains are reflected in a corresponding growth in positive motivation.

References

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