Creative Writing: A Resource for Increasing Over-All Foreign or Second Language Proficiency

Sharon Reimel de Carrasquel
Simón Bolívar University, Venezuela

Taking into consideration the importance of developing written skills in EFL/ESL programs at the university levels, the main object of this paper is to briefly discuss traditional approaches to the teaching of written production and to describe three creative writing activities that depart somewhat from these approaches and to show how this type of activity can contribute to overall foreign or second language proficiency. The insertion of the activities in different course types and levels as well as guidelines for the correction of "creative" written production are also discussed.

During the last two decades a number of experts have commented on the reading-writing connection in the EFL/ESL context (Widdowson, 1978; Eisterhold, 1990; Meek, 1990; Carter & Long, 1991; Lewin, 1992; Castillo & Hillman, 1995; Doddis & Novoa, 1997) to name but a few, while still others (Zamel, 1982; Applebee, 1984) have attested to the intimate relationship between writing and learning. Furthermore, authors such as Blot (1993), Singh & De Sarkar (1994), Leki & Carson (1994) and Hirvela (1994) have pointed out the importance of teaching writing, particularly technical-academic composition in EFL and ESL programs at the university level.

Although most teachers would agree that the development of writing skills should be an integral part of the EFL/ESL program, teaching writing skills is a time consuming process, requiring good planning, an astute eye for the selection and preparation of materials, and high levels of enthusiasm to motivate students to participate in an activity that they often find boring or unpleasant in their native language. Moreover, the teaching of writing demands both an infinite amount of patience and large amounts of time for correcting numerous papers over and over again. Learning to write is also time consuming for the student; the compositions, technical reports, or narratives that are typically assigned for homework require significantly more time to produce than learning lexical items or identifying functional indicators in specific texts. Even the verbal recounting of a piece of literature is less time consuming and often easier than producing a written version of the spoken exposition. This is perhaps due to the fact that ". . . in writing, meanings must be explicit. Understanding of the need to be explicit forces writers to engage with the propositions contained in their text more than in speaking" (Boughey, 1997, p. 127).

While it is undeniable that teaching and learning how to write, even in one's native language, is a time-consuming, demanding process, it is also undeniable that literacy in the target language is a necessity. Undoubtedly, being able to read technical-scientific material and literary texts is essential in developing language proficiency, and often constitutes initial points of entry into the second or foreign language. However, at some point the learner will be required to give proof of his or her understanding of the textual or spoken language in written form. For example, the student is frequently requested to summarize the ideas presented in literary or academic texts, to write letters or reports based on certain written information, and to write theme-based essays and descriptions of situations or experiments. At the professional level even more types of writing may be required: minutes of meetings, memos, letters, evaluations of projects or personnel, articles, reports and messages, to name but a few.

Many of the more traditional methods have treated writing and composition as the natural outgrowth of reading, assuming that by an observation process of a variety of correctly written texts and a series of guided exercises, the student would somehow develop his or her own ability to produce written material; thus, more emphasis was placed on reading rather than the actual process of writing. The popularity and continued use of this type of approach is exemplified by Hirvela (1997), who advocates the use of "disciplinary portfolios" as a means of increasing written proficiency in academic contexts because the students are obliged to read, analyze, and write about research in their particular areas of specialization using as models authentic samples of writing by members of the students' discourse community.

Other authors have taken a more eclectic approach and devoted themselves to developing new methods and materials destined to improving the writing skills of the language student. As a result, many of the current practices in teaching writing in EFL/ESL contexts have shifted their focus to the facilitation of developing good writing practices rather than on the instruction of what constitutes "good writing." Within this paradigm writing has been conceptualized as a cognitive process involving the linguistic proficiency and the cultural knowledge needed for the written expression of one's thoughts (Gould, DiYanni & Smith, 1989; Eisterhold, 1990; Carter & Long, 1991, Sing & De Sarkar, 1994; Leki & Carson, 1997).

Although this approach offers a much wider variety of activities and takes into consideration the importance of the student's thought process, less attention has been paid to the creative aspect of writing. However, the necessity of being creative even within the context of technical-scientific papers and in business communication has been pointed out by Gould, DiYanni & Smith, (1989) and Goby (1997). Therefore, it seems important that we provide our students with more opportunities for developing their

creativity in writing English by involving them in activities that encourage the spontaneous production of stories, poems, and imaginary conversations or letters to famous people (present or past). In doing so, we are also increasing their potential for over-all language proficiency by putting them in direct contact with the language and allowing them to experiment with a variety of linguistic and cultural elements.

In contrast to the typical writing activities discussed previously which rely on models of discourse or model answers, creative writing activities, executed spontaneously, presume no previous knowledge of the combination of linguistic elements that will be required to complete the written task. No suggested answers are provided, and few, if any, examples of discourse are presented, which means that the writing is executed spontaneously, taking its information from both internal and external stimuli.

The fundamental objective of the following activities is to stimulate creative writing using a variety of stimuli. All of the activities have been used successfully in literature, culture and reading courses at the university level in Venezuela. In fact, a short anthology of 30 poems entitled "Waterfall of Feelings", written by engineering and basic science students was reproduced and distributed among students and professors at the Simón Bolívar University. Of the three activities described below, one is reading-based, while the other two are based on visual and audio-visual stimuli. Because the activities can be done in from one to four, one-hour class periods, they can be easily integrated into regular course work schedules. They are presented in ascending order in terms of complexity and duration.

The Activities

Activity 1: What are they saying? (What did they say?)

Materials: A selection of two to three-minute, video taped segments of cartoons (movies or soap operas for more advanced groups).

Procedure: Show the students a video-taped segment of a cartoon. Turn off the sound portion of the tape so that the original dialogue cannot be heard. Replay the video two to three times and then tell the students to write what they imagined was being said by the characters (including animals, monsters, robots, etc.). For beginners the written product can be limited to a few simple sentences, while for intermediate and advanced students complete dialogues can be required. In order to encourage spontaneity, allow no more than five to ten minutes for writing and tell the students to use their imaginations to the maximum (fantasize). At the end of this ten-minute period, ask students to read their papers aloud. This takes about five to ten minutes depending on the size of the class

and usually generates a good deal of laughter and provides an excellent point of departure for further discussions and any number of language issues.

An optional extension of this activity is to show the same video in another class session and ask the students to write a brief description of the action or to project what might happen. (What did they do/What are they doing? — What will they say? What will they do?) These papers can also be read aloud and discussed. It is important to mention that in the case of a very large class (30 or more) all parts of this activity can be done in pairs or in groups of up to four students. The dialogues and description produced by more advanced students are often longer and generate lengthier discussions, so more time should be allowed for these groups.

Grading: The grading of the papers is left to the discretion of the teacher; however, they can be evaluated on the bases of the variety of lexical items used, the appropriateness of language related to a specific function, originality of approach to the theme, in addition to spelling and grammar. Furthermore, the teacher has the opportunity to correct pronunciation while the students are reading their papers.

Level and Course Type: While this activity is probably best suited to four-skills courses because it is centered on language rather than content, it can also be used successfully in culture courses if the video selection presents typical situations encountered in the target culture. In courses focusing on scientific English, showing segments of cartoons or movies of robots or other mechanical characters not only encourages the student to use specific technical vocabulary and language in a creative manner but also provides a few minutes of relaxation and enjoyment.

Activity 2: The words unspoken.

Materials: Because this is a reading-based activity designed to be used in literature courses, it requires no special equipment.

Procedure: This activity takes its origins from the fact that very often conversations between the characters of a novel or a short story are implied but not written into the text and what would have been said is left to the reader's imagination. Therefore, the activity simply consists of the imaginary reconstruction of this type of conversation. After the story or portion of the novel has been read and discussed and the students are thoroughly familiar with the message, plot, setting and characters, the teacher points out a specific situation in which a conversation presumably took place (or an internal dialogue of one of the characters occurred as a reaction to an event) and tells the students to write a brief conversation or monologue depicting what the characters would have said. The students can be told to think about how they themselves would have reacted

or what they would have said in a similar situation. The important thing is to be imaginative while remaining within the mind-set of the characters and taking into account the setting and plot of the text. Depending on the size of the class this activity may be done in pairs or individually. About 15 to 20 minutes should be allowed for the written part of the activity and another 20 or more minutes should be devoted to reading the papers out loud and discussing them.

Grading: Originality, complexity, and variety of language used in the dialogues or monologues constitute the principle criteria for grading the papers as well as the student's ability to demonstrate his or her understanding of the story or novel. Here too, spelling and grammar can be corrected. This activity also offers a teacher an opportunity to correct pronunciation and syntax during the reading of the papers. While these papers should be written in class in order to foment spontaneity, they may be re-written and revised as a homework assignment.

Level and Course-type: Even though this activity is ideal for literature courses, it can also be used in culture courses where, for example, students can write dialogues between famous historical figures or in scientific-technical English programs where students can write dialogues between famous scientists before or after great discoveries or internal monologues describing how a scientist felt while developing a particular process or product. The procedure is the same as are the criteria for evaluation.

Activity 3: You are a poet, but you don't know it.

Materials:

(1) One or two audio cassettes on which a selection of music has been recorded. The music should range from very rhythmic (waltzes, marches, etc.) to very modern electronic music in which the rhythmic patterns are difficult to perceive

(2) Compact discs can also be used if a programmable, multiple disc player is available

(3) A selection of approximately 20 slides depicting various scenes from nature, photographs of people, famous paintings, different types of sculpture and architecture

(4) Slide projector and sound equipment for playing cassettes or CDs

(5) Photocopies of a short glossary of literary terms and exercises. (For rhythm and rhyme exercises see Gabriel, 1983)

Procedure: The teacher discusses the nature of poetry, pointing out that it is a special, highly-condensed use of language in which precision and subtlety predominate.

He or she should explain that the writing of poetry, while an exceedingly creative process based on internal and external stimuli, is not the exclusive property of a talented few, but rather can be written by everyone, given the appropriate conditions. The teacher then hands out the exercises and the glossary of some poetic terminology (alliteration, image, metaphor, simile, connotation, rhyme, rhythm, symbol) and discusses their meanings. At this point some samples of music can be played to demonstrate the concept of rhythm, followed by a few short exercises. It must also be explained that not all poems have rhyme. Be sure to provide some examples. (Haikus and short poems contained in the hand-outs). At this point, the teacher asks the students what poems do. He or she can initiate the discussion by suggesting that they create images, convey messages about human conditions and emotions, or describe people or places. Let the students continue to provide more ideas. This gives the students the idea that poems are vehicles for expressing one's thoughts and feelings about an infinite number of subjects.

Procedure: Select two or three slides of different themes (i.e., nature, people, sculpture) and an appropriate musical background for each. Project each slide for one or two minutes and tell the students to think about what they feel and what memories are brought to mind when they look at the picture and listen to the music. Ask the group which of the slides was their favorite (majority rule) and project it once again with the musical selection. Tell them to write down any words they associate with the picture and the music. After a few minutes, initiate a group poem. For example, if the picture is about nature, the teacher could begin by saying "The mountains are majestic and mysterious". Each student adds a verse until the entire class has participated. The teacher should write each verse on the blackboard, demonstrating how the class has created a poem. This is an excellent method for overcoming fear and gives the students a sense of accomplishment. Aspects of the poem can be discussed and corrected to achieve better rhythm or rhyme or create more effective images.

Procedure: The teacher projects the slides, which have been arranged to coincide with different types of music, telling the students to think about how they feel when they see the different pictures and listen to the music. After a second projection, tell the students to select a favorite slide and write down three or four words that come to mind when looking at this slide. Ask them to think about how the music contributed to their reaction to the visual image. Then ask the students to try and write two or three descriptive words for each noun they have written, to group the words into short sentences or phrases, and to arrange them on the paper as if they were poems. Encourage students to read their "poems" aloud and discuss originality, lexical items, rhythm, and rhyme. Although some students will feel shy about reading their "poems" out loud, most join in after hearing the work of their classmates. Do not force any student who is unwilling to participate at this moment. Poetry sometimes evokes strong emotions and

expresses very personal feelings. These poems should be taken home, worked on as a homework assignment, and brought to the following class.

Grading: It is extremely important to discuss the evaluation procedure with the students since they will be evaluating their own poems. They should be asked what they consider to be valid criteria for judging a poem. Because most students immediately say 'originality' or 'creativity' should constitute the main criteria, it is better to orient their thinking towards asking themselves the following questions and providing the answers. "What did I want to do and what did I do?" (describe a place, express a feeling, express an opinion, etc.). "How did I do it?" (imagery, metaphors, rhythm, rhyme, etc.). "What was different about the language I used?" (combinations of sounds, inverted syntax, no punctuation, etc.). Once the criteria have been established points (or letter grades) can be assigned to each area in order to obtain an over-all grade. Not only does the participation in the establishment of grading criteria increase the students' sense of control over his or her own product, but it also enhances their understanding of poetry and expands their knowledge of the language. In the case of the group poem, grading should be limited to active participation rather than any individual contribution. The correction of pronunciation during the recitation of the poem is optional.

Level and Course Type: Because of its complexity and length, this activity is best suited to literature or composition courses although reduced versions (eliminating individual poems and doing only group poems) could be inserted into any type of reading or four skills course, including ESP courses in technical and scientific English. In this case, by modifying the content of the slides slightly, poems can be based on language functions such as comparison and contrast, defining, or cause and effect. The procedure and grading are the same in either type of course.

Discussion

With respect to increasing over-all language proficiency, we can say that the previously described activities have the potential for doing so on three levels: affective, linguistic, and cognitive. Moreover, these conclusions concur with much of the current literature in the EFL/ESL field.

On the affective level, various authors Carter and Long (1989), Castillo and Hillman (1995), Barkhuizen (1995) among others, have affirmed that creative writing is motivating, enjoyable and promotes self-esteem. Furthermore, spontaneous writing of this nature usually takes place in a nonthreatening environment in which grading, if any, is flexible and is not aimed at penalizing less than perfect papers. As Leki (1991 in Barkhuizen, 1995, p. 45) has pointed out, "There is a place for error-free writing, but it does not have to be the main goal for writing classes." Another motivating factor

involved in creative writing is the fact that the student takes possession of the language and makes it his or her own. This, according to Lewin (1992) is crucial in fomenting both developing readers and writers, and is seconded by Leki and Carson (1997) who point out that experiencing a more intimate interaction between language, the personal interests, needs, and cultural backgrounds of the students are important in terms of linguistic and intellectual growth. Obviously, any increase in motivation will have a positive effect on the student's attitude and, therefore, on his or her learning process. Since the activities described in this paper have proven to be highly motivating and pleasurable for most students, even at the beginners level, it can be assumed that they contribute, albeit indirectly towards, increasing language proficiency.

On the linguistic level creative writing offers the student the opportunity to learn and retain a large variety of lexical items because he or she has had to find the appropriate word or phrase without the benefit of a model answer. In writing poetry, students can learn to use adjectives more effectively (Rogers, 1996) or be encouraged to use synonyms or antonyms to increase their vocabulary. Furthermore, according to Gabriel (1983), "In order to master a spoken language, the student of that language must hear and be able to approximate the tone and melody of the language: the rhythms and rhymes, the stress patterns, the nuances that prose writers employ, the liberties that poets take." Because of the spontaneous nature of the writing of stories, poems, and dialogues, the student is obliged to continuously select from among a variety of language options the combination or sets of combinations which are best suited to the social features of the situation (Halliday, 1985). Because this knowledge is transferable to both written and oral skills, over-all language proficiency is enhanced.

At the cognitive level, we can conclude that creative writing, because of its essentially spontaneous characteristic, promotes the development of the thinking process by requiring the student to order his or her thoughts with little or no *a priori* knowledge, of which set or sets of language, options will be most adequate or appropriate for fulfilling his purpose. This experimentation process is described in the model proposed by Sing and De Sarkar (1994) and reflects one of the essential characteristics of creativity pointed out by Simonton (1997) in his model of creative productivity. According to this model, no previous knowledge of the set or sets of elements necessary to the accomplishment of a finished product typifies the creative process. Creative writing also shares the fundamental requirements of all writing and language tasks in that it demands the organization and manipulation of one's thoughts as well as the selection of appropriate information and accurate language relative to a specific situation (Boughey, 1997). Finally, we would suggest that mastery of a foreign or second language is contingent on the individual's ability to be creative, to be able to respond to unfamiliar situations spontaneously and appropriately, and this is only accomplished by

providing the student with ample opportunities to practice his creativity in an unthreatening environment.

References

Applebee, A. (1984). Writing and reasoning. *Review of Educational Research, 54,* 577–596.

Blot, D. (1993). Testimonials: Empowering ESL students to write. *College ESL, 3*(1), 15–27.

Boughey, C. (1997). Learning to write by writing to learn: A group work approach. *ELT Journal, 5,* 126–134.

Carter R., (Ed.). (1990). *Knowledge About Language.* London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Carter, R. & Long, M. (1991). *Teaching Literature.* Essex, U.K.: Longman.

Castillo, R., & Hillman, G. (1995). Ten ideas for creative writing in the EFL Classroom. *English Teaching Forum, 33*(4), 30–31.

Doddis, A., & Novon, P. (1996). Estrategias de aprendizaje y nivels de competencia en comprensión y producción escrita en una segunda lengua. (Learning strategies and levels of competency in written comprehension and production in a second language) *Lenguas Modernas, (23)*133–150.

Eisterhold, J. (1990). Reading-writing connections: toward a description for second language learners. In B. Kroll, Ed. *Second Language Writing*, (88–101). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Gabriel, G. (1983). *Rhyme & Reason,* New York: Regents.

Goby, V. (1997). Arguments against providing model answers in the writing skills classroom. *TESL Reporter, 30*(2), 28–33.

Gould, E., DiYanni, R., & Smith, W. (1989). *The Act of Writing.* New York: McGraw Hill.

Hirvela, A. (1997). Disciplinary portfolios and EAP writing Instruction. *English for Specific Purposes, 16*(2), 83–99.

Kroll, B. (Ed.). (1990). *Second Language Writing.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Leki, I., & Carson, J. (1997). Completely different world: EAP and the writing experiences of ESL students in University Courses. *TESOL Quarterly, 31,* 39–67.

Lewin, L. (1992). Integrating reading and writing strategies using an alternating teacher-led/student-selected instructional pattern. *The Reading Teacher, 45,* 586–591.

Meek, M. (1990). What do we know about reading that helps us teach? In R.Carter, Ed. *Knowledge About Language* (pp. 145–153). London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Simonton, D. (1997). Creative Productivity: A Predictive and Explanatory Model of Career Trajectories and Landmarks. *Psychological Review, 104*, 66–98.

Singh, R., & De Sarkar, M. (1994). Interactional process approach to teaching writing. *English Teaching Forum, 12(4)*, 18–23.

Widdowson, H. (1978). *Teaching Language Communication*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Zamel, V. (1982). Writing: The process of discovering meaning. *TESOL Quarterly, 16*, 195–209.

About the Author

Sharon Reimel de Carrasquel is an Associate Professor of English and Psychology, as well as Coordinator of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities in the office of Research and Development, Simón Bolívar University. She has 18 years professional experience in EFL programs at the university level in Venezuela, specializing in American Literature and American Culture courses.