

Teaching Creative Writing in English: An Innovative Means of University-level EFL Education

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This paper (1) introduces an innovative way of improving EFL learners' thinking strategies and their writing skills, (2) represents possibilities in the organic blending of Western educational principles and literary classics with the actual teaching of English creative writing in China, and (3) opens up broad prospects for direct intercultural communication between and among learners and users of English all over the world. This paper examines English creative writing as taught to EFL learners in China, touching upon the relevant teaching rationales and methods, and the stepped learning procedures of comprehension, imitation and creation. My students' creative writing outcomes showcase their sensitiveness, imaginativeness and creativeness. The uniqueness and significance of a well-structured English creative writing course just lie in the fact that it follows the general line of humanistic education; it enhances the overall quality of EFL learners' self-expression in English. At its best, an English creative writing course might help EFL learners create an eye for beauty, a taste for verbal art, and a voice of self-expression for themselves; it might also help them create links between writers and readers, between feelings and meanings; it might help them create channels of intercultural communication as well.

Based on my teaching experience as a Chinese professor of English, this paper examines English creative writing as taught to EFL (English as a foreign language) learners in China, touching upon the relevant teaching

rationales and methods, and the stepped learning procedures of comprehension, imitation and creation. Creative writing creates. What might an English creative writing course help EFL learners create? At its best, it might help them create an eye for beauty, a taste for verbal art, and a voice of self-expression for themselves; it might also help them create links between writers and readers, between feelings and meanings, between facts and truths; it might help them create channels of intercultural communication as well.

My academic experience as a Chinese professor of English includes the following —teaching English creative writing (poetry writing and fiction writing) to Chinese undergraduate and graduate students at Beijing Second Foreign Language University; giving lectures on the teaching and learning of English creative writing at Capital Normal University (Beijing), and at Shanghai Finance and Economics University; conducting research on the communicative function of English creative writing at the Graduate School, Drew University, USA, and at the School of English, Queen's University of Belfast, UK; writing and publishing *Surf the Sea of Poetry*, a guidebook of poetry writing, through Foreign Languages Press (Beijing, 1998); compiling and publishing *Poetry and Me – Poems Written in English by Chinese Students* through World Culture Publishing Company (Beijing, 2002); writing and publishing *Poetry and Fiction Writing in English: A Guidebook* through People's Press (Beijing, 2003).

The uniqueness and significance of a well-structured English creative writing course offered at a Chinese university just lie in the fact that it inspires the EFL learners to aim high, bring their creative potentialities into full play, and produce intellectual and spiritual wealth by using English as a foreign language. That is to say, it follows the general line of humanistic education, and urges the EFL learners to look at human universals and constants behind everyday life in order to seek truths from facts; it represents possibilities in the systematic integration of the EFL learners' reading practice with their writing practice, and contributes to the improvement of their thinking strategies and learning skills; it enhances the overall quality of the EFL learners' self-expression in English, and opens up broad prospects

for intercultural communication.

CREATIVE WRITING AND ENGLISH LEARNING

As a global language, English is an intercultural and multifunctional medium. It is deplorable for EFL learners to be passive receivers of the knowledge of English, merely parroting its vocabulary and grammatical rules. It is desirable for them to be sensitive, imaginative and active learners who learn English while using it creatively. One of the recommendable ways of learning English is to practice using it to create verbal art, to do creative writing, or in other words, to write poetry, fiction, literary nonfiction, etc.

I have been teaching English creative writing to Chinese undergraduate and graduate students. They are English majors and “sophisticated” EFL learners. The youngest of them is about 20 years old, and has learned English for nearly 10 years. At the very beginning of the poetry writing course, they do not respond enthusiastically to writing tasks. Some of them think too little of poetry writing, saying, “Poetry writing will be entirely useless in our future careers.” And there are others who think too much of poetry writing, saying, “We have not written any type of poetry before, not even in Chinese. Poetry writing in English is absolutely beyond our reach.” I endeavor to affirm that poetry writing is and will be useful, because its actual process, among other things, trains one to be sensitive, imaginative and creative so as to fulfill the personality requirements of almost all careers, and that there is no mystery about poetry writing, and progress in poetry writing can be made only when one puts pen to paper. Fortunately, my students of all kinds have been cooperating well with me. They may have no subjective initiative to write poetry in English by themselves, but they are able to produce surprisingly good poems if they are properly encouraged or impelled to write. It is they who comment jokingly, “Poetry is nonsense, and poets are nuts.” It is they who try their best to write poetry as amateur poets. I constantly remind them that they do have a great advantage of being bilingual, and of

being potentially capable of English creative writing, though they themselves may not be aware of it. In fact, they possess in their minds the two linguistic systems of Chinese and English, which are coexistent, sometimes cooperative, and sometimes conflicting, with the words, sounds and patterns of the mother tongue indicating, balancing, modifying, supplementing and / or revitalizing its English counterparts. Well guided, this kind of dynamic equilibrium may give rise to unique, meaningful literary creation. I agree with Gregory Trifonovitch (1981), who says, “It is extremely important for non-native speakers of English to abandon their inferiority complex and to realize that English now belongs to the world and not to an elite group only. Their variety and style is just as acceptable as any other style of English.” (p. 215).

By adopting an open-minded approach to the literary quintessence of the English-speaking countries, and by taking up English creative writing, my Chinese students learn to hold the initiative of active learning, and are happy to find another working language to make use of, another rhythm to tone in with, another meaning system to refer to, and another Muse to turn to—for inspiration. In the process of writing-oriented reading, they pay much closer attention to the words on the page, their connotations and symbolic meanings; they learn about English artistic representations of the issues of personal worth, national identity, ultimate spiritual concerns, etc, “through felt cognition or cognitive feeling” (Reid, 1983, p. 27); they try consciously to discern some techniques and laws of English creative writing, and explore the relationships between illusion and reality, between clarity and ambiguity, between the orderliness of verbal art and the freedom of wordplay.

Many of my students are drawn to the phonetic, lexical and syntactical otherness of English, and they are enthusiastically engaged in localizing and vivifying the foreign language by using it for creating typically Chinese settings, events and images. They have a great sense of achievement when they challenge themselves by putting aside their own monosyllabic Chinese language, and creating a rhythmic flow of speech in English. Both their willingness and their ability to communicate in written English are gradually developed in creative reading and writing practice, and their communicative

skills of English listening and speaking are also improved by benefiting from teacher-led classroom discussions about literary classics in English as model works, and from critiques between and among peers about their own writings.

EFL learners' creative writing practice is sure to encourage their practice of imaginative association. Using the global language of English creatively, my students heighten their awareness of interrelatedness of objects, events and people around the globe. They think and link in an imaginative way to embrace the beautiful, the virtuous and the truthful as an organic whole, and they write to sympathize, to empathize, and to love. The following poem by one of my students (Hou, 2002, p. 184) clearly indicates that its first-person speaker is spiritually empowered to transcend the circle of self, and establish a loving connection with the whole world.

I Am Part of the Whole

I have never been to Uganda,
Yet I know about the civil war there.
I have never been to the South Pole,
Yet I know about the melting icebergs there.

I am not an astronomer,
Yet I cheer man's first step on the moon.
I am not a European woman,
Yet I cry over the disaster of the Titanic.

I listen, I watch, and I read.
I am part of the whole.

CREATIVE WRITING AND SYSTEMATIC TEACHING

Ideally, for EFL learners, an English creative writing course is part of arts education through entertainment, and part of character education through enlightenment. It encourages EFL learners to be free from the drudgery of

mechanically memorizing English words, and furthermore invites them to use those foreign words playfully— and meaningfully—so as to take aesthetic pleasure in giving personal artistic descriptions of life; it cultivates EFL learners' ability to think in imagery, inspires them to be visionary enough to see the moral and spiritual nature of reality, and trains them to be imaginative, creative and responsible individuals.

Taking my students' mentality and aptitude into consideration, I include the following objectives in my plan for teaching English creative writing, and endeavor to achieve them—(1) to help my students discuss the thematic and stylistic importance of the “I”, and use the “I” as a center of consciousness, as a carrier of conviction, and / or as an embodiment of feeling; (2) to help my students experiment with different figures of speech to create lifelike images; (3) to help my students gain a deeper appreciation of the natural cadence of English; (4) to help my students see how human universals and constants have been written about, how human nature can be defined metaphorically or metaphysically, and how the universal writer's mentality finds expression in creative writing; (5) to help my students examine how creative writing creates visions of human and cosmic unity (or disunity) by emphasizing (or de-emphasizing) the spiritual links between and among human individuals and natural objects; (6) to help my students make sense of different types of creative writing, and become acquainted with their cultural implications and linguistic characteristics.

When teaching poetry writing, I mainly use *Surf the Sea of Poetry*, the above-mentioned guidebook of poetry writing published by Foreign Languages Press. It contains three sections (18 units) -- “Section One (6 units): Poetry and the ‘I’”, “Section Two (6 units): Meaning and Imagery”, and “Section Three (6 units): Meter and Rhyme”, which are followed by 4 appendixes, “Suggested Readings”, “Thoughts on Poetry Writing”, “Chinese Learners' Poetry Writing Samples” and “Further Thoughts on English Creative Writing”. The basic contents that each unit includes are as follows: Main Points, Learning Objectives, A Classic Poem in English, Questions for Reading Comprehension, Exercises of Imitation, Exercises of Poetry Writing,

Supplementary Reading, More Exercises of Poetry Writing, Notes, and Glossary.

I follow the general reading and writing directives as proposed in that guidebook to suggest in class (1) that my students read poetry in English so imaginatively as to be able to relate it to their personal lives, (2) that they use the selected short classic poems as model poems for the purpose of imitation, (3) that they build up their confidence as beginners, and start to write candidly from the point of view of the “I”, (4) that they write free-verse poems first, without consideration of regularity in rhyme, meter and length of lines, (5) that they learn to express ideas and feelings by using precise images, and (6) that they make sense of the contribution of meter and rhyme to the musical effect of poetry, and practice using regular metrical patterns and rhyme schemes in poetry writing, if possible.

CREATIVE WRITING AND SELF-EXPRESSION

When he talks about his own experience of teaching poetry writing to EFL learners in Japan, Davies (1998) states, “The procedure I’ve suggested involves getting the students to write poetry without first giving them any specific written examples. The reason for this is that some students feel that model poems are ‘superior’ writing and may try to imitate them without thinking for themselves” (p. 26). My approach is just the opposite. I attach great importance to model works, I consider them to be some of the primary sources of inspiration for EFL learners, and I regard imitation as one of the legitimate and indispensable activities in an English creative writing course. I strongly recommend my students to read model works at the outset, and let them know what the criteria of good writing are. What is more, instead of discouraging them from imitating model works, I encourage them to do writing exercises of imitation as one of the initial steps towards substantial self-expression—believing that all types of artistic creation begin with imitation.

As exemplified below, I teach poetry writing to my students mainly by using model poems. I use the following:

- Emily Dickinson's poem "I'm Nobody! Who Are You?" (to explain the various possible identities of the "I", the poet-speaker, an imagined person, or a *dramatis persona*);
- Emily Dickinson's poem "To Make a Prairie It Takes a Clover and One Bee" (to justify the creativity of imagination);
- John Keats' poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (to display the affinity between beauty and truth);
- John Keats' poem "Ode on Melancholy" (to show how such "nonsense" as oxymoron makes sense);
- William Wordsworth's poem "The Tables Turned" (to indicate the need for man to learn from nature);
- Archibald MacLeish's poem "Ars Poetica" (to describe the ambiguous nature of poetry);
- Walt Whitman's poem "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing" (to reveal the differences as well as the similarities between the poet-speaker and the personified natural object);
- Walt Whitman's poem "Song of Myself" (to lay stress on the transcendent value of the commonplace);
- William Blake's poems "Infant Joy" and "Infant Sorrow" (to elaborate on the basic concepts of meter and rhyme);
- William Blake's poems "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" (to convey the idea that the caesuras of a poem slow down its flow, and its enjambements speed up its flow);
- William Butler Yeats' poems "The Sorrow of Love" and "When You Are Old" (to manifest an alternating rhyme scheme "a b a b", and an enclosing rhyme scheme "a b b a");
- Robert Frost's poem "Fire and Ice" (to illustrate how the rhyming words of a poem are grouped into a pattern of comparison or of contrast).

By imitating model works in diction, sound or syntax, and by using parodies or allusions, my students think for themselves, and enjoy making their own artistic statements. Here are two examples of this kind: "Give me those six little chickens that are singing a sweet song," (which is imitative of

Walt Whitman's alliterative line "Give me the splendid silent sun with his beams full-dazzling,") and "Poetry is the demon with dimples," (which is imitative of Emily Dickinson's metaphorical line "'Hope' is the thing with feathers --").

In persistent writing practice, my students have been increasingly aware that, in order to express themselves well, they first need to acquire adequate knowledge about themselves, and about the people and things they are related to; they need to rethink human relationships and natural surroundings; they need to be capable of sympathy and empathy; they need to use figures of speech to create fresh images; they need to weigh every word and pay attention to its musical effect; they need to represent individual thoughts and emotions in such a way that they become universally significant.

The following two student writing samples (Tang & Wang, 2002, p. 30 & p. 14) showcase the authors' ability to produce expressive images, go well beyond mechanical descriptions of facts, and crystallize certain timeless literary themes in a sincere personal tone.

The Cruellest Design of Nature

It is the cruelest design of Nature
For me to resemble my mother so --
Our eyes, lips and voices
Are exactly the same --
For when her eyes no longer shine,
When her lips no longer curve with smiles,
When her voice no longer offers a melody of life,
When she ceases to be,
How lonely I will be in this world!
How miserable to be the second one to die!

Coal

Buried deep for millions of years,
Twisted trees and other things turned

Into dark, delicate and colossal jade.

What are unearthed now
Are trees' growth rings
And birds' wings.

What are unearthed now
Are squirrels' supper
And snakes' sloughs.

In a jubilant flame,
Probably, there is
A leaf's breath, a bird's song,
A cone's aura, or a snake's dance.

It is true that my students have made numerous grammatical and stylistic errors while writing, and the weaknesses as found in their writings involve unidiomatic or hackneyed expressions, awkward rhymes and rhythms, sweeping generalizations, cheap sentimentalism, shallow didacticism, etc. Their writings are by no means flawless. It is also true that creative writing practice itself has provided them with an opportunity to learn (or take warning) from their own past demerits constantly and conscientiously so as to avoid future ones. The more poems and stories they write and revise, the better they understand grammar, style, feeling and meaning.

My students feel the happiest, and have a great sense of achievement and success when they choose to read, recite or explain their best poems for themselves in the classroom activity of oral presentation. They also love to share their wonderful poems with native speakers of English outside class, at a higher level of intercultural communication, and they never fail to find an appreciative audience. Promptly encouraged, they become more and more interested in poetry writing.

TOWARDS INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

English creative writing and intercultural communication are two interactive processes. Creative writing is by nature communicative, and the global language of English used to generate creative writing outcomes allows intercultural communication to take place between certain individuals, on certain conditions, and in certain forms. For example, an American's poems written in English might inspire a Chinese reader; the inspired Chinese might be able to write his or her own poems in English, and get them published in this or that way so as to reach out to American readers and / or some other English-speaking readers.

As is indicated at the beginning of this paper, I have compiled and published *Poetry and Me – Poems Written in English by Chinese Students* through World Culture Publishing Company (Beijing, 2002). That collection of about 150 poems draws the attention of my foreign colleagues—professors of English in the USA, the UK, Finland, etc. The following are some of their comments (Daragh Carville & Sonja Servomma, personal communications, 12 January 2002 & 17 December 2002), parts of ongoing intercultural communication:

“Many thanks for letting me have a look at the work of your students, which I have read and enjoyed. Considering it is written in the students’ second language, it is quite remarkable. I enjoyed the clear images and musicality in the writing of Wang Lei’s poem ‘Coal’, the specificity and emotional truthfulness of Tang Li’s ‘The Cruellest Design of Nature’, and the thoughtful allusiveness of Liu Yumei’s ‘A Question and an Answer’ and Wang Lan’s lovely ‘Tea-making’.”

“I have read through the poems with much time and consideration. Your students write so wonderfully, freshly and deeply. It has been a great enjoyment to read them. I look forward to the possibility of going over to your university again...Then we must have some poetry sessions with the students as well.”

There are many possibilities. It is possible that there will be more course offerings of English creative writing at Chinese universities; it is possible that Chinese EFL learners' creative writings in English will have a wider audience at home – in China; it is possible that some web-pages will be designed for direct intercultural communication conducted between and among Asian EFL learners and native speakers of English, through online creative writing workshops, discussions, publications, readings and performances; it is possible that Asian EFL learners, while creating their own verbal art in English, will broaden their poetic outlook to create a greater spiritual haven for kindred souls elsewhere as well as for themselves – in Asia, and beyond Asia.

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