

報告

大学の英語の授業としてのクリエイティブ・ライティング

ギュンター・ディルク
徳島大学全学共通教育センター

要約：本論文は、二年生のために企画した「クリエイティブ・ライティング」の英語授業の実施とその結果について報告する。本論文は、「クリエイティブ・ライティング」はただ「英語で書くことを教える」だけの授業ではなく、一般的なコミュニケーション能力をも楽しみながら高めることができる授業であることを紹介する。

(キーワード：英語，大学教育，英作文，ライティング，文学)

Creative Writing in University Classes

Dierk Günther
Center of General Education, The University of Tokushima

Abstract: This paper describes the planning, conducting and results of a 'Creative Writing' course held for second year students of Tokushima University. It will show that 'Creative Writing' is an enjoyable and efficient way to help students improve not only their writing skills, but also their general communicational skills.

(Key words: English, higher education, writing in English, literature)

Introduction

In the 2012 edition of the 'Journal of University Education Research' the article 'Creative Writing – Efficiently Teaching Japanese Students the Joy of Writing in English' introduced Creative Writing as an efficient way of teaching English. This article described the proceedings of an ongoing 'Creative Writing' course which was held at that time as an extra-curricular special program at Tokushima University's 'English Support Room'. The same article showed that 'Creative Writing' not only helped students to just improve their writing skills, but also helped their communicative skills and raised their interest in literature. It further suggested that 'Creative Writing' could also be used as part of the English education at Japanese universities.

This present article is a sequel to the report mentioned above, as it will describe the proceedings and preliminary results of a 'Creative Writing' course held in four classes for second year students during the academic year 2012/2013.

Conducting the Course

(a) Basic Prerequisites – Proceedings

The course was conducted in four classes during the

summer and winter semester 2012/2013 and had sixteen units. The English level of both classes during the summer semester was lower intermediate, while the level of the winter semester's classes was slightly better than intermediate. All classes were conducted in English only, with the exception of two units (marked below with a *). Those contained too much specialized vocabulary.

In all four classes the following topics were introduced:

- 'What is 'Creative Writing'?'
- 'Finding Topics/Fighting a 'Writer's Block'
- 'The Perfect Beginning – How to Start a Story'
- 'Developing a Plot*'
- 'Creating a Scene'
- 'Character Development'
- 'Analyzing a Story*'
- 'Showing vs. Telling'
- 'Dialogues'
- 'Reimagining/Rewriting a Story'

Several units were also spent with letting students work between 20 to 30 minutes on writing prompts (writing exercises like e.g. 'Write about saying goodbye' or 'When she looked out of the window she saw...' or writing games like composing a story by

beginning each sentence with a letter of the Alphabet etc.) and sharing the results with the class.

Since there were no proper textbooks on 'Creative Writing' available for university classes, the teaching and learning materials needed to be self-prepared by the teacher. However, several sources were available: The course's syllabus was an enhanced version of the extra-curricular 'Creative Writing' course held at the 'English Support Room'. Material for the units was taken from various sources like available writing coaches for aspiring writers¹⁾ or from writers' groups' Internet sites and then adapted to the Japanese students' English level. Another very helpful source for producing student oriented Creative Writing materials were the syllabi and course materials of Creative Writing classes found on the websites of American, Canadian and Australian high schools.

Course participants were required to keep a Writer's Journal, a notebook used for their weekly homework as well as free writing. Students were asked to carry their Writer's Journal with them all the time throughout the course, so that they could jot down ideas and inspirations for stories, do spontaneous writing, as well as work any time on their final assignment. This Writer's Journal was checked twice during the course and also had to be handed in by the end of the semester to be reviewed as part of the students' final grade.

Each week students were given five writing prompts. Students could either write about each of these prompts or had the option to select up to three of these prompts then write about two topics of their own choice. For each writing assignment students should write for 20 minutes. Here students were introduced to the course's most important rule: 'Creativity First'. Students were clearly told that when it came to doing writing assignments (be that at home or in class), creativity was always to come before bothering about correct spelling and grammar which would just obstruct their creative flow; The immediate goal was that, within a given time frame, students should produce something they enjoyed writing. This product

could then be improved, rewritten and reworked later. Self correction of mistaken grammar or spelling would be done then.

The course was conducted in two different ways with the course's content being the same. This was done in order to find and try out the most efficient form of conducting future Creative Writing courses. In the summer semester the classes were split into two groups after five units introducing aspects of 'Creative Writing'. One group attended a teacher guided lesson, while the other group was expected to use this time to work at home on their weekly assignments and their final assignment. This final assignment was to be an original story of 1500 to 2000 words. The reasons for splitting up classes were (a) that working with a smaller number would provide more opportunities for course participants to share their written pieces with the group, (b) that working in a smaller group would help students overcome their shyness to share their written pieces and (c) that students would have sufficient time to work on their final assignment.

In winter semester, classes were not split up and the course was held weekly for all students. In this case more time was given to in-class writing practices and debates about pieces produced in class.

In these classes, students had to produce by course unit 9 a draft of the story that they wanted to hand in as their final assignment. After this unit followed two units in which students received individual counseling on how to improve their drafts.

By the end of the summer semester, the students of the two classes were asked to fill out a questionnaire about their impressions of the course. This questionnaire was in Japanese and students could state their opinion anonymously and in Japanese.

(b) Problems – Results

In all classes the students' reaction towards this new kind of class was astonishingly positive although it took most of the participants some time to get used to certain aspects. Most notable was all students' disbelief that they should write without bothering

about correct grammar and spelling. In spite of being told so, during the first few writing assignments, many students were using dictionaries. This dictionary use was not necessarily restricted to checking the correct spelling of words, but to also find words students wanted to use in their pieces but whose English meaning they didn't know. In these cases students were encouraged to trust in their English skills, to 'keep their writing simple', and to rather use vocabulary they were familiar with. Otherwise they should express the words they didn't know in a different way. Although at first very skeptical about this advice, they were given text examples (taken from other classes) on how unnecessary/wrong dictionary use could ruin an otherwise perfect text. After that the number of dictionary users became significantly less.

Also another unexpectedly positive result was students' willingness to share their written pieces in class. In all four classes, from the very first unit on, there was never a lack of volunteers to read their pieces in front of the group. Especially interesting to see was that even students with weaker English skills were very eager to share their works. Only in one class two students openly showed no interest in sharing their written assignments. In both cases two reasons for this intentional lack of participation soon became obvious. Both students' English level was – even for Japanese standards – on an especially low level and both students also admitted to having 'absolutely no interest in English'.

In spite of these highly positive reactions, several problems became obvious. After three units, students were slowly led into reviewing their classmates' written pieces. As a very first step, after a written piece was shared, students were asked to tell the class one point they enjoyed about the piece presented. The teacher also made it very clear that there were no wrong answers since every person has different tastes and opinions. Nonetheless it became sadly obvious that many, if not most, of the Japanese students were not used to formulating, then presenting, an individualized, personal opinion to a group. Even

considering the high possibility that some students couldn't understand what their classmates presented or that they lacked the English skills to express their opinions, most responses given were lackluster, intentionally superficial, or outright unimaginative. In one class, students even went so far as to repeat the same answer given in response by the very first student. In case of this class, a very stern warning by the teacher resulted in students providing more useful feedback from then on. In other classes, praising contributors and steadily repeating that there was no wrong answer by sharing personal impressions helped to encourage students to participate and offer more substantial contributions. Nonetheless, this is a point that needs to be worked on when it comes to planning future Creative Writing classes.

Another problem involved the Writer's Journals which students were expected to keep. When checking students' Writer's Journals, it became obvious that in the summer semester classes, many students had problems dealing with the freedom offered by the course. In spite of having been encouraged to write about anything they wanted, many students resorted to writing a kind of superficial daily diary (although they had also been told that 'keeping a diary' is not creative writing). Given this result, students of the winter semester classes were provided with sufficient writing prompts for their daily writing practice. A further problem was also to ensure that students were indeed writing every day for at least 20 minutes. As the results of the questionnaire handed out in summer semester show²⁾, less than a third of all course participants really spent two hours per week (as required by Tokushima University) to write their assignments. In order to cope with this problem, strategies such as raising the number of words of the final assignment need to be considered.

In spite of this, enough students in all four classes were keeping their 'Writer's Journals' in a satisfying manner. Out of 54 students of all classes, only four students had to be admonished to show more effort in their daily writing exercises. Checking these students'

Writer's Journals at a later point of time showed that the warning was obviously understood. As a possible side effect, one of the warned students presented an extraordinarily well-written piece as his final assignment.

Generally it could be seen that in all classes most students were sufficiently practicing writing. While in most students' cases the very first writing assignments were not longer than 40 words, the length/number of words of the weekly assignments written by students steadily grew during the course to an average number of 350 words per assignment.

Students also showed a growing confidence in their writing, experimenting with what they had learnt in class.

As to the final assignment, at the time this paper is being written only the final assignments of students of the summer semester classes are available for evaluation, while in case of winter semester classes only first drafts have been presented.

In case of the final assignment of the summer semester classes all assignments handed in³⁾ showed that students had used strategies learnt in class for their own written pieces. Overall, the assignments' plots were well-constructed and not just results of 'writing and seeing in what direction this writing leads' (a strategy also permissible.). This proved that students had, indeed, acquired writing skills they were competently using when composing their assignments.

While spelling mistakes were obviously taken care of with computer spell-checking programs, all assignments contained grammatical mistakes. These mistakes were expected, but astonishingly, or rather very positively, the percentage of grammatical mistakes in all the texts was less than expected. It was also especially pleasant to see not one assignment received was unintelligible due to grammatical mistakes

Judging from the quality of the drafts received in winter semester, the same results can be expected (with the notable exception of the two students mentioned above, whose drafts showed not only their

lack of English skills, but, unfortunately, also a clear lack of willingness to produce a decently written piece.)

A matter which shall not be addressed in detail, but needs mentioning, concerns the content of the assignments/drafts handed in. Ninety percent of the stories were Fantasy stories and only 10 percent were set in a realistic environment. Many stories used standard Fantasy tropes like 'good magician versus bad magician', dragons, and fairies. They combined them with topoi like 'friendship' or 'overcoming obstacles by personal growth'. In one case, 'bullying' was the central topic of an extremely well written Fantasy piece. Rather worrying on the other hand, is the fact that many stories had death, suicide, isolation, loss of loved ones, and hopelessness as their central topic.

(c) Ways of Conducting a 'Creative Writing' Course

As mentioned above, the course was conducted in two ways. In the summer semester, after five introductory sessions the classes were split, with one group having to attend lessons, while the other group was expected to use this time to work on their final paper.

In winter semester, the classes were not split and all students had to attend the weekly sessions. In both cases the course's content was the same.

Even with the winter semester's courses still ongoing at this time of writing this paper, it is safe to say, that holding the course without splitting the class is the better way to conduct a Creative Writing course at university level.

The decision to split classes and teach in smaller groups was based on the assumption that it would be easier for students to work/participate in an environment of no more than 14 students. It was also assumed that students would need extra time to efficiently work on their final assignments. Both assumptions have proven to be wrong. It has turned out that the willingness of students to share their

written pieces with their classmates is higher than expected. A class size of eighteen to twenty students is also suited to have active debates and offer each student sufficient time/opportunity to actively participate in each session.

Regarding students needing more time to work on their final assignments, many students admitted in personal conversations that they didn't take advantage of this extra time given. Instead of working regularly throughout the semester on their final assignments, students started to work on their stories only shortly before the deadline.

This situation has been rectified during winter semester where students had to hand in a first draft of their story by midterm. Several advantages of handling matters this way have hereby become obvious: Students start to work early and regularly on their assignments. With a deadline looming on the horizon, students also need to spend sufficient time to work on their story in order to timely hand in their assignment. Having to present an up to a certain degree 'finished' product by midterm also makes the time spent working on the assignment more meaningful to students than just a superficially repeating of last class's content or preparing for a future test.

From the teacher's point of view, receiving a first version of students' final assignment by midterm has also many merits. The teacher can not only get an impression how much the class in general has learnt over the past units. Each student's individual improvement, problems and attitude towards the course can be clearly seen when evaluating the assignments received. Finally, efficient teaching on personal level can be achieved with individual counseling given on how to improve those assignments to become a final version. Students should come to realize that their work is being given sufficient attention/appreciation by the teacher, which should again raise their motivation to further improve their assignment.

(d) Students' Feedback

In summer semester's last session, students were given a questionnaire which they were asked to fill out on a voluntary basis. Out of 58 students, 54 students returned this questionnaire.

The following questions were asked with the results given below:

(1) Do you like reading books?

Yes: 34 No: 20

(2) Did this class raise your interest in literature or writing?

No: 1 A little bit: 29 Yes: 24

Replies to question (1) clearly showed that the number of students interested in reading (62%) was not very high. This anyway not so high number might even be lower if one takes into consideration that some replies perhaps interpreted 'reading' not as reading books but rather manga. Assuming that the replies given to question (2) were really honest, the course clearly managed to raise students' interest in reading and writing.

(3) How much time did you study for this class every week?

Less than 30 minutes:	7
30 minutes – 1 hour:	8
1 hour – 90 minutes:	25
2 hours:	9
3 hours:	5

This data once again show the well-known fact that students do not sufficiently study outside of their regular classroom times. In case of this writing course, according to Tokushima University's guidelines students were supposed to spend two hours per week of studying outside of their regular classroom time. As can be seen, only fourteen students (25.8%) were doing so. The majority of students (25 = 46.3%) claimed to have worked between one hour and 90 minutes per week on their assignments. Fifteen students (27.8%) admitted that they studied/wrote less

than one hour outside of classroom time.

Here it is obvious that in future courses measures need to be taken in order to assure that students really spent the required time studying: Raising the amount of words of the final assignment seems at present the best possible way.

In spite of the realization that many students were not as committed to the course as they should have been, as has already been mentioned, the quality of assignments and Writer's Journal entries was generally from satisfying to good.

(4) Would you say that this class raised your motivation to study English?

Yes: 52 No: 2

Again, if one were to trust the truthfulness of the replies, the course was obviously highly successful in raising students' motivation to study English.

Questions (5), (6), (7) gave students the opportunity for a free feedback, an opportunity which was eagerly used. As it is not possible to list every single answer, only a selection of the most representative or interesting answers will be given below.

(5) What would you like to see improved in this class?

'Would prefer to hand in final paper in handwritten form and not computer written'

'Content was too difficult' (2 students)

'More time given for writing final assignment'

'Would like to read more authentic texts in class'

These points were the only complains concerning the course's content.

Most other criticism was leveled not so much at the course's content than the teacher's general policy on class rules like tardiness etc.. As these complains do not have anything to do with the course's content, these comments were not listed here.

(6) What did you like best in this class?

'Rewriting/reimagining the story of 'Momotaro' '(48 students)

' Being allowed to decide the topic of final assignment' (3 students)

'Listening to classmates' written pieces and giving feedback'

'Having many opportunities to speak English.' (8)

More than 30 replies stated 'I enjoyed the course throughout', a compliment highly appreciated, but unfortunately not too helpful in getting any further insights. On the other hand, the popularity of a course unit in which students should rewrite/reimagine the Japanese tale of 'Momotaro' might indicate that students felt more comfortable working with familiar material.

(7) If you feel this class was useful for you, please give an example:

(a) 'I learned to improve my writing' (7 students)

(b) 'Up to now I felt my English was not good enough to read or write in English. Having taken this class, I learned that I could do so and I really want to write stories from now on, in English as well as in Japanese.'

(c) 'Having been told that we should write freely and without using a dictionary helped me to enjoy writing without worrying. Still there were many times when I felt that I wanted to write much, much better. Up to now I didn't enjoy English classes, but this class has made me really want to study English from now on.'

(d) 'I understood the importance of actively giving my opinion without having to be embarrassed and learned how much fun communicating in English is. This will help me when going abroad.'

(e) 'I was nervous in class and not good at expressing myself. In this class I acquired self-confidence to speak English.'

(f) 'I had many opportunities to speak English in class.' (12)

The feedback given in this section strongly shows that students felt that they had learned much more than

writing in English. Although being presented as a ‘Creative Writing’ course, it can be seen that thanks to the course students had also gained confidence in speaking and expressing themselves in English. The feedback also hinted at students feeling that they learned something in this course, which they could use outside of the classroom (comment c and d).

Conclusion

This paper has shown ways how to conduct ‘Creative Writing’ classes at university. It has also shown that students, while unfortunately not dedicating as much time as hoped outside the classroom, students showed improvement in their writing skills. Students feedback presented in this article also strongly indicates that the positive results of a ‘Creative Writing’ course not only resulted in better writing skills; students improved and gained confidence in their communicative English skills too.

Notes

¹⁾ Among the available writing coaches especially the following publications turned out to be useful:

- Brandeis, Gayle, (2002). *Fruitflesh*, HarperSanFrancisco
- Couturier, Andy (2005). *Writing Open the Mind*, Ulysses Press HarperSanFrancisco
- Le Guin, Ursula K., (1998). *Steering the Craft*, The Eighth Mountain Press
- Masih, Tara L., (2009). *Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction*, Rose Metal Press
- Reeves, Judith, (1995). *A Writer’s Book of Days*, New World Library
- Selgin, Peter, (2007). *By Cunning & Craft*, Writer’s Digest Books
- Stein, Sol, (1995). *Stein on Writing*, St. Martin’s Press

²⁾ See section ‘(d) Students’ Feedback’

³⁾ Two students didn’t hand in their assignments in time and consequently failed the course.

References

- Brandeis, Gayle, (2002). *Fruitflesh*, HarperSanFrancisco
- Couturier, Andy (2005). *Writing Open the Mind*, Ulysses Press
- Günther, Dierk (2012), ‘Creative Writing’ – Efficiently Teaching Japanese Students the Joy of Writing in English, *Journal of University Education Research*
- Le Guin, Ursula K., (1998). *Steering the Craft*, The Eighth Mountain Press
- Masih, Tara L., (2009). *Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction*, Rose Metal Press
- Reeves, Judith, (1995). *A Writer’s Book of Days*, New World Library
- Selgin, Peter, (2007). *By Cunning & Craft*, Writer’s Digest Books
- Stein, Sol, (1995). *Stein on Writing*, St. Martin’s Press