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Second Language Writers and Creative Writing

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Abstract: When ESL students come into an American classroom, they are introduced into the academic literacy through composition classrooms. The writing assignments introduced into these students ignore their cultural background. In this article, I incorporate creative writing—autoethnography and poetry writing—into the class to value ESL students' cultural background.

By looking through a critical lens, creative writing allows L2 students to act as cultural agents who learn English to share their local cultures and learn other culture as well (Pennycook, 1999). The on-going discussion on academic writing in ESL classes by using Standard English is the same as putting students in a certain conventions in which they cannot stretch and express both their ideas and themselves freely (Canagarajah, 2006). This is the reason why I propose the use of creative writing as creative writing allows students to express themselves freely without worrying about making errors and mistakes in writing. It also enhances students' cultural background as well as their identities (Ivanic & Camps, 2001). In this article, I start the article by defining what creative writing. Then, I discuss two creative writing assignments—autoethnography and poetry—that teachers can use to promote intercultural communication.

Some scholars define creative writing as a type of writing which allows and opens opportunities for student writers to take risks as they reflect, discover, create and explore themselves and their experiences (Bishop, 2006; Moxley, 1989; Tarnopolsky, 2005). Other scholars might see this writing as a type of "not-so-serious" writing and regard it as nonacademic writing. Personally, I agree with the former discussion that creative writing allows students to create their own spaces in their writing.

Creative writing is aligned with expressive pedagogy. Expressive pedagogy can be understood as the process of writing in which writers' selves and voices are present (Burnham, 2001; Cherry, 1998; Ivanic & Camps, 2001). As Selfe and Rodi state (1980), "expressive composition [or writing]...refers to the definition or discovery of personal

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identity and the expression of self through writing" (p. 169) and is similar to a "contact zone" (Pratt, 1991, p. 33) or a "safe house" (Canagarajah, 1997, p. 174) because students are free to expand their sense of selves and explore different styles of writing, different writing voices, and their own experiences. In other words, writing is not detached from but directly related to the writer's self-expression and discovery. An important aspect of this process is the writer's reflection on his/her social and cultural contexts. The following excerpt is from an ESL student from Taiwan coming as an exchange student to study in an American university for one year; she discusses her experience learning English when she was in her younger years in Taiwan. The title of the paper is "How does English have a significant impact on my life?"

My mother said "It was not my decision to force you and your brother to learn English, it was you telling me that you wanted to study English"...I was the youngest student in my English class, and I was so frustrated... Being inconfident and stressed, I refused to go to the class and started to dislike English at that moment. I was glad I did so, because after a few weeks, I had developed a sense of achievement in English. ...English turned out to be my best companion, which really took a vital part in my life. It is so amazing to get along with people and know different cultures. Life is full of adventures, novelties, and warmness. I like the world, the people, and the life, and myself. (Ana)¹

In this case, this student discusses her learning experience and the frustration she had at the beginning of her learning process. Ana, at first, did not know anything about English language and the culture that comes with it. She learned more about English culture when she went to England for an intensive course. She reflected in her paper that she needed to speak up and be more expressive when she did not understand the lesson in class since in her culture she dares not to question teachers out loud. Rather, she went to see her teacher during office hours to clarify the content so that other students would not think that she was behind or could not understand lessons. Then she thought she came to the United States to learn English and its culture. At first, she was really nervous about this. By taking chances, she would gain more experiences

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in a different culture. Slowly, she raised her hand and asked teachers to repeat or to give more examples so that she could understand the lesson. After that, she started sharing her ideas and expressed her feeling well by the end of the course. The struggle has paid off in the end because she feels that she can communicate and share her culture with others (Chamcharatsri, 2009; Pavlenko, 2007).

Another L2 student's creative writing that I want to discuss is in the form of a poem. Poetry brings out students' voices and self in different forms. Students are asked from the professor who is in charge of this ESL composition section to find examples of poems both in their native language and in English. Students are also asked to analyze both their native poetry in terms of word choice, themes or topics of the poems and structure. Then they will have a chance to write their poems and be informed that they will read their poems aloud to the whole class. By reading aloud, students get a chance to explain what his/her poem is about, sharing their culture with others, at the same time, students will answer questions from friends who do not share the same cultural background. The poem below was composed by an ESL student describing one of the Japanese alcoholic drinks:

Ume-shu

Do not mix with soda.
Just on the rocks.

Sweet,

Aromatic,

As if I'm in a flower garden.

Wait till
Your glass wears lots of tiny dots of water

Feel it,

The way of the Japanese
(Sam)

The question "why poetry" has been raised. Poetry writing is a task that asks students to reflect upon their personal experiences. This written assignment is a valuable task L2 students can complete to explicitly express themselves since "poetry

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writing [in the L2] should emphasize self-expression and...meaningful and personal language interaction...when writing poetry, [L2 learners] should be encouraged to explore...new language [and ways] to express their experiences" (Hanauer, 2004, p. 57). Besides, when writing poetry, L2 learners are free to express themselves and not worry about structure and grammar, which most of the time inhibit learning and creativity. When students do not worry about structure and grammar, they will be more expressive and play with language at the same time. Hanauer (2004) points out that poetry writing helps L2 learners to "express their experiences, thoughts, and feelings,...complex ideas [by] using simple vocabulary and syntactic structures" (p. 76).

To conclude, these writing tasks, autoethnography and poetry writing, can emancipate ESL students by valuing their cultural background. This could be connected to Kramsch's (1998) idea that language and culture are woven in a complex relationship. When students, especially ESL students, feel comfortable and confident in expressing themselves in the language they are learning, they will be able to communicate successfully in both understanding other cultures as well as sharing their culture with others (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). All in all, creative writing can be implemented in class to promote intercultural communication and help students gain understanding of their own cultural background as well as the culture they are learning about at the moment.

¹Students' names are pseudonyms.

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