

Teachers and students' challenges in English as a Second Language creative writing classes

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ABSTRACT

The challenges teachers and students may face in Creative Writing in English (CWE) as a Second Language (ESL) courses have not been extensively researched in Brazil. Thus, the main objective of this research was to identify and investigate the types of challenges teachers and students may face in creative writing classes. (CHAMBERLAIN, 2005; CSIKSZENTMIHAYI, 1995; JOHN-STEINER, 2010; LUBART, 2007; MALEY, 2012; POPE, 2005; RAMET, 2007). The approach of this research was the action research. (FERRANCE, 2000). The research location was the extracurricular Fanfictional Creative Writing in English as a Second Language at a public university in São Paulo, Brazil. The sample of this study consisted of five Languages and Literature undergraduate students, plus their respective teacher. The research methods used were the questionnaire (BRADBURN, 2004), classroom transcriptions (MONDADA, 2007), unstructured interviews (PATTON, 2002) and oral feedback sessions. (TARAS, 2013). The results indicated that CWE may help teachers and students develop their creative and linguistic skills. In addition, the data investigated displayed that the students voice should be considered more frequently. Teachers should be more flexible and attentive to their students' objectives and idiosyncrasies.

Keywords: ESL Teachers and students. Creative Writing in English. Challenges.

Os desafios dos professores e alunos de escrita criativa com inglês como segunda língua

RESUMO

Os desafios que professores e alunos podem enfrentar nos cursos de Escrita Criativa em Inglês (ECI) não vêm sendo amplamente pesquisados no Brasil. Sendo assim, o principal objetivo desta pesquisa foi o de identificar e investigar os diferentes desafios os quais tanto os professores quanto os alunos podem enfrentar nas aulas de Escrita Criativa. (CHAMBERLAIN, 2005; CSIKSZENTMIHAYI, 1995; JOHN-STEINER, 2010; LUBART, 2007; MALEY, 2012; POPE, 2005; RAMET, 2007). Com inglês como língua estrangeira (ILE). Esta pesquisa foi embasada na pesquisa-ação (FERRANCE, 2000). A coleta de dados ocorreu no curso extracurricular *Fanfictional Creative Writing in English* em uma universidade pública em São Paulo, Brasil. Os sujeitos de pesquisa deste estudo foram cinco estudantes da graduação de Letras, juntamente com seu professor. As ferramentas de pesquisa utilizadas foram: um questionário preliminar (BRADBURN, 2004), transcrições de sala de aula (MONDADA, 2007), entrevistas não-estruturadas (PATTON, 2002) e sessões orais de feedback. (TARAS, 2013). Os resultados indicaram que a ECI pode ajudar os professores e alunos a desenvolver suas habilidades criativas e linguísticas. Além disso, os dados investigados mostraram que a voz dos alunos deve ser considerada com mais frequência nas aulas de língua estrangeira. Por

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sua vez, os professores devem ser mais flexíveis e atentos aos objetivos e idiossincrasias de seus alunos.

Palavras-chave: Professores e alunos de ILE. Escrita Criativa em inglês. Desafios.

1 INTRODUCTION

The studies about creativity have increased since 2000 in Brazil. Private companies as well as a plethora of national Universities have highlighted the importance of its development in today's world. The reinforcement of this development is also due to its legalization by the Brazilian government as a fundamental cognitive skill in 1996. Although creativity has been apprehended as an important skill since then, there is still little research about the challenges undergraduate students may face in creative writing classes at the university.

For ESL teachers to help their respective students develop their creative skills, they should be properly prepared to do so while they are still learning to teach. This fact has been proved by many international and national studies that demonstrate the importance of developing and implementing tertiary programs for teachers to evolve adequately as professionals of education. (CHAMBERLAIN, 2005; CSIKSZENTMIHAYI, 1995; JOHN-STEINER, 2010; LUBART, 2007; MALEY, 2012; POPE, 2005; RAMET, 2007).

Hence, my main motivation for carrying out this research was the conspicuous lack of formal teaching and learning of creativity at Brazilian language and literature university courses. Many of them do not even provide their undergraduate students with specific classes to develop creativity such as creative writing and acting classes. The goal of this study was to identify the challenges teachers and students may face in creative writing classes in English as a Second Language.

The primary beneficiaries of this research would probably be the Language and Literature ESL teachers, creative writing teachers, public and private school coordinators, and even already in-service teachers. They may directly benefit from this research due to the fact that its findings can display their teaching and learning practices as reflective workers of education. Consequently, they may improve their employability and future classes of English as a Second Language.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The current literature reviewed has indicated that there is little research about the challenges English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and students may face in creative writing classes (CHAMBERLAIN, 2005; CSIKSZENTMIHAYI, 1995; JOHN-STEINER, 2010; LUBART, 2007; MALEY, 2012; POPE, 2005; RAMET, 2007) at the university. One of the challenges is related to the conceptualization of creative writing.

Creative writing may be quite difficult to conceptualize as it is with any type of artistic activity. However, creative writing today is not only art, it also entails more objective texts such as journalistic and academic ones. Both Csikszentmihayi, (1995) and Chamberlain (2005) believe that the adjective *creative* has been placed before the noun *writing* in many writing courses at the universities worldwide to reassure students that they will not only learn how to write, they will *really* write something.

For Chamberlain (2005, p. 47), this would explain why “[...] *there are many more creative writing classes than creative painting classes, creative acting classes, creative sculpturing classes, and so on*”. Furthermore, Pope (2005) attests that the adjective *creative* may also encompass a set of other adjectives as complex as creative such as imaginative, original, expressive and inspirational.

These adjectives have had profound influence on how Language and Literature undergraduate students may understand the process of writing fictionally to date. Besides, this may also have stirred the deep complexification of the concept of creativity which has changed since Ancient Greece. (POPE, 2005; LUBART, 2007). Although it is quite difficult to conceptualize creative writing, some courageous scholars have tried with reasonable success.

Adèle Ramet is one of these scholars. She (2007, p. 11) defines creative writing as “[...] *having the power to create an imaginative, original literary production or composition*”. Ramet (2007) even adds that it can be applied to a very broad spectrum of writing genres. As a matter of fact, creative writing has been constantly apprehended as literary work or literary techniques to developing literary work.

Lubart (2007, p. 34) calls creative writing “[...] *the art of making things up fictionally*”. In the wake of Csikszentmihayi, (1995) and Chamberlain (2005), Lubart (2007) also believes that the adjective *creative* placed before *writing* is to stress the importance of the act of writing, because many creative writing teachers do not motivate their students to compose indeed physical texts.

All these authors have highlighted the complexity around the concept of creativity as well as the many possible concepts creative writing may display, depending on which approach we decide to take. They have also focused on the adjectivization of the concept of creativity and stressed the importance of using it before the noun writing. Hence, it is still important to apply the adjective *creative* before *writing* to reinforce the act of writing in creative writing classes, which are sometimes subsided by their teachers.

In addition, Maley (2012, p. 26) attests in his studies that “[...] *creativity is widely believed to be a ‘good thing’, enriching the quality of life and learning*”. The focus of his studies was on the development of undergraduate students’ ESL creative writing at English Universities. One of his main findings indicated that through the teaching of creative writing, students can better understand textual genres and more properly organize their own texts. This may occur because “[...] *creativity is widely believed to be about letting the imagination loose in an orgy of totally free self-expression*”. (MALEY, 2012, p. 27).

Moreover, John-Steiner (2010)’s studies indicate that this enriching positiveness and self-expression freedom may be recognized as a type of setback by the students. Based on the Vygotskian sociocultural theory, the author states that “[...] *creativity depends on development, and development depends on creativity*”. (JOHN-STEINER, 2010, p. 63).

If a student does not have an adequate environment to develop their creative skills, the development of their higher mental functions may be limited and improper to deal with today’s world. For her, if students do not find a receptive environment to develop their creative writing, they may become introspect and unwilling to participate in the course.

Although Maley (2012) and John-Steiner (2010) have different perspectives about creativity and creative writing classes, they both agree on the importance of teaching and developing creativity in creative writing classes. For them, creative writing teachers should develop their students’ creativity while learning a second language. And this may effectively be accomplished through motivating the students to *really* write fictional and non-fictional texts. This approach to teach ESL and arts may even boost the students’ artistic flair making them more enthusiastic about learning the target language.

3 THE CONTEXT OF THIS RESEARCH

The research data collection took place in the second semester of 2016, at the Faculty of Philosophy, Language and Literature, and Human Sciences (FFLCH), via the Department

of Modern Languages (DLM), located in the University of São Paulo (USP), São Paulo, Brazil. I, the teacher-researcher, collected the data from the extracurricular course entitled *Fanfictional Creative Writing in English* (*Escrita Criativa Fanficcional em inglês*, in Portuguese).

This course was directly based on Vygotskian sociocultural theory. By and large, it entailed a total of 30 hours, 10 presential classes of 3 hours each and, additionally, 2 formal feedback sessions. In order to enroll in the course, all the students should present a TOEFL (Test Of English as a Foreign Language) ibt score of at least 500 and present a fanfiction of their own.

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was primarily qualitative in nature, and based on the action research principles. For Ferrance (2000), action research is a type of research that is authentic and significant to the teacher-researcher. This occurs because one of its advantage is that the teacher plays not only the teacher role, but also the researcher in the classroom.

Thus, to achieve that, they try to “[...] *pick up threads suggested in academic circles, and weave them in their own classroom*”. (FERRANCE, 2000, p. 13). Another advantage of action research is that it opportunizes the teachers to be responsible for their own teaching, changing it whenever and wherever possible. Furthermore, their subjects are motivated to participate in the researching process which makes it more interactive.

5 THE PARTICIPANTS AND RESEARCH TOOLS

The subjects of this research were all female undergraduate students from Languages and Literature courses of the University of São Paulo (USP), Brazil. They all participated in the extracurricular course *Fanfictional Creative Writing in English*. For this course, there were 12 enrolments of undergraduate students from different language and literature majors in the Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Literature, and Human Sciences (FFLCH). For this study, the teacher-researcher only considered 5 out of the total of enrolled undergraduate students. This occurred because 5 abandoned the course at the beginning and the other 2 did not complete all the required tasks.

The research tools used were a preliminary questionnaire (BRADBURN, 2004), classroom transcriptions (MONDADA, 2007), unstructured interviews (PATTON, 2002)

and oral feedback sessions. (TARAS, 2013). The preliminary questionnaire consisted of 27 questions to identify the participating students' writing profile in English. It was also used to apprehend their personal motivations to take the course.

The classroom transcriptions were written versions of everything they produced during the course, ranging from class oral participation to parallel commentaries. The unstructured interviews were applied, because they allow the interviewer to reformulate the questions based on his/her interviewee's responses. The oral feedback was used not only to collect more data, but also to show students' their own fanfictional creative writing development. (VYGOTSKY, 2007).

5.1 Teachers and students' challenges in English as a second language creative writing classes

Throughout the *Fanfictional Creative Writing in English* course, the teacher and his participating students faced many challenges outside, but specially inside the classroom. Based on the preliminary questionnaire (BRADBURN, 2004), 4 out of 5 of the students interviewed conceptualized creative writing as a very personal experience and a chance of freedom as well as self-expression. I truly believe that one of the main functions of creative writing classes is to have students' voices heard, whatever they may be.

Both students and teacher-researcher's opinions about creative writing exemplify Maley (2012)'s observations about the mechanics of creative writing classes. Maley (2012, p. 112) highlights that "*the kind of writing we ask students to do (and the way we ask them to do it) will depend, as most other things do, on their age, level, learning styles, and interests*".

Nevertheless, the students and the teacher-researcher's actions inside the classroom sometimes did not match with their preliminary opinions. As a result, this caused several conflicts, obstacles, modifications as well as reassessments about the Vygotskian sociocultural theory. These have also influenced substantially the participating students' writing processes. The results of this research are indicated in the following section.

5.2 Limited knowledge on literary genres

There are various branches or forms of literature which is called genre. Although there are some repetitive characteristics that we can use to identify a specific type of genre, Bakhtin (2000) attests that each reproduction of a text by a subject is a new performance,

i.e., a brand-new textual production, a new experience. For this reason, for Bakhtin (2000), reiteration of a textual genre is theoretically inconceivable.

Even though teachers may establish a very specific literary genre to be taught in creative writing classes, the genre chosen is likely to suffer distinct types of mutations during them. And this is what occurred in this course. The teacher-researcher failed to take into consideration the textual genre mutability. I *mistakenly* believed that my students should follow *ipsis litteris* my preliminary instructions.

In relation to other more objective writing classes such as academic or persuasive writing, students' text may be closer to a certain chosen textual model. However, fictional creative writing classes tend to be the students' opportunity to experiment a certain textual genre. This did not happen very often in this course, which limited substantially the student's creativity as well as motivation to do the classroom tasks.

A possible explanation for my behavior may also be related to my own limited knowledge of textual genres and their respective recurrent theories. Swales (1990, p. 24) states that a "[...] *genre is a type of writing which members of a discourse community would instantly recognize for what it was.*" This statement implies that a person to be able to classify a certain text properly needs to understand what his/her discourse community perceive as a textual genre. If he/she fails to achieve that, he/she probably has not comprehend clearly his/her community yet.

6 OBJECTIVES AND IDIOSYNCRASIES

Another relevant aspect of creative writing classes is about students' objectives and idiosyncrasies. This research indicated that each participating student displayed unique objectives for taking the *Fanfictional Creative Writing in English* course. Some of them, written in the preliminary questionnaire (BRADBURN, 2004), were: improving writing skills, practicing the four linguistic abilities (speaking, listening, reading and writing) and understanding better the fanfictional literary genre.

Wright (2014) had similar findings in his book *Creativity in the Classroom*. He demonstrated that different individuals may have different objectives to produce a text. Furthermore, as fictional creative writing classes should motivate students to play with texts (Ramet, 2007) due to their sense (VYGOTSKY, 2007) of writing freedom. This may have a massive impact upon their own writing process. (KROLL, 2000). Accordingly, the research

results showed that students' idiosyncrasies and their sense of freedom in creative classes impacted students' writing productions.

In relation to the *Fanfictional Creative Writing in English*, the students freely digressed from my chosen literary genre (short stories). Instead, most of them (4 out of 5) opted for other literary genres (poems and flash stories). Along with it, they politely refused my main objective (writing a fanfiction about superheroes). Rather, they chose their own inspirational writing topics (songs, mangas, soap operas etc.).

According to Wright (2004), there is not only one 'right' literary genre that teachers should recommend in creative writing classes. Teachers should suggest different genres and then encourage their students to experiment as well as opt for one that is personally effective for themselves. (WRIGHT, 2014).

6.1 Lack of motivation

In the classroom transcriptions (MONDADA, 2007), all the participating students stated that a motivated student may develop him/herself faster than those unmotivated. Student A summarizes effectively this point of view: "The more you motivate the students the more students are motivated and get ready for creative writing so it helps the teachers to teach creative writing more adequately".

In the same vein, they all also agreed that motivation plays a significant role in learning. Most of their statements may be summarized by student C's following answer: "We need to be motivated to write creatively, because this is one of the most personal types of writing there is. I believe we can learn a lot here".

However, the teacher-researcher did not know how to motivate his students. In fact, by imposing the textual genre (short story) I wanted to work in class, my students felt their voices silenced as student B's spontaneous speech implies: "I think we could choose other texts. What do you think? I believe we can have more chances if we do so".

The teacher-researcher attempts to express concern: "I think we should", but right after it, I reinforces my main objective: "You can choose based on what I indicated in the bibliography". Student B then replies: "Yeah, but you have just given to us one option, short stories". This short dialogue between the teacher and his student exhibits the teacher's unwillingness to negotiate, which contrasts directly with his own discourse of promoting a

safe environment for students to develop their own creative texts. (MALEY, 2012; RAMET, 2007).

6.2 Non-proficiency in English

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages was created by the Council of Europe to define standards for language learning, teaching and assessment related to all modern European languages. In addition, they also indicate what language learners should learn to use their target language properly. This also involves the knowledge and abilities they need to develop to use it adequately. According to CEFR, a person is considered able to use a language effectively when he or she reaches C1 or C2 (proficient user).

For the *Fanfictional Creative Writing in English* course, I required at least level B2. Language proficiency is usually understood as a person's ability to speak or perform in a second language. (BAKER, 2006). Students' incapacity to perform suitably in their target language may cause limitations of many types and even embarrassment. (LITTLE, 2006). In relation to the *Fanfictional Creative Writing in English* course, all the participating students displayed basic difficulties in writing their fanfictions.

In the first oral feedback session (TARAS, 2013), 3 out of 5 claimed that their difficulties were due to lack of proficiency in English. In general, they did not know how to deal with nonroutine information (B1 level), express themselves in familiar contexts (A2 level) or exchange information in a simple way (A1 level).

However, the lack of proficiency was not only about English. In fact, none of participating students could conceptualize properly the genre they claimed they have written for at least 2 years in the preliminary questionnaire (Bradburn, 2004), classroom transcriptions (MONDADA, 2007), unstructured interviews (PATTON, 2002) and first oral feedback session. (TARAS, 2013).

In the preliminary questionnaire (BRADBURN, 2004), they all stated that fanfictions are stories made by fans. This indicated that their beliefs (MOON, 2000) about this literary genre are virtually based on its etymological construction (*fan + fiction*). This hypothesis was reinforced when I asked them to differentiate fanfiction from fanzine. As a result, they did not know how to do it. They all expressed surprise which student C summarized accurately in words: “[...] I had never heard of fanzines in her life”.

6.3 Overemphasis on lexicogrammatical errors

One of the most current questions made by the participating students during the *Fanfictional Creative Writing in English* course were about *lexicogrammatical errors*. By and large, most of the students' spontaneous questions, recorded in the classroom transcriptions (MONDADA, 2007), were to clarify their doubts about word order, collocations, active verbs and inversion in English. Interestingly to notice, in the unstructured interviews (PATTON, 2002) and first oral feedback session (TARAS, 2013), they all overemphasized the importance of proper lexicogrammatical knowledge to compose better fanfictions.

The students' lexicogrammatical overemphasis behavior toward the creative writing classes may be explained by 3 factors: 1) 3 out of 5 of them were not proficient in English, 2) all of them had never participated in a creative writing class before and 3) most of the teacher-researcher's oral feedback was on the students' lexicogrammatical errors.

They indeed produced several types of errors (HARMER, 2010) such as catachresis (unfitting use of a word for another), hypercorrected (made due to low-level teaching classroom resources or the teachers themselves) and overgeneralization (inadequate use of L1 lexicogrammatical rules in L2). Nevertheless, some of their errors were overcorrections.

This attitude toward the target language may be very harmful (MAICUSI, 2000), because one overemphasized pattern has great chances of being reproduced intermittently by students as well as teachers in inappropriate contexts. Furthermore, Zhu (2010) adds that the learning of a foreign language may be completely discouraged by the teacher who overemphasizes lexicogrammatical errors, raising resultantly his/her students' level of anxiety.

6.4 Writing as a product

One of the first approaches to teaching writing in ESL for undergraduate students was the writing as a product. Its basic role was to help these students to elaborate a textual composition by correcting superficial linguistic errors. The writing as a product teacher's emphasis was on motivating their students to use the standard English and eliminate as many errors as possible.

According to Hairston (1982), this approach lost its influence rapidly, being replaced by the writing as a process approach. Thus, the writer's emphasis changed to content and

organization. Its basic role was more about opportunizing situations where the students could understand more substantially and experiment more intensely the process of writing than producing a finished piece of writing. (BROWN, 2001).

In relation to the course *Fanfictional Creative Writing in English*, one of the main teacher-researcher's findings was that all the participating students apprehended writing as a product. Interestingly to notice, they all claimed that they understood writing as a process in the preliminary questionnaire (BRADBURN, 2004) and in the first oral feedback session. (TARAS, 2013).

However, they could not identify the 5 basic steps of writing as a process (prewriting, writing, revision, editing and publish). Additionally, they all refused to rewrite their own texts, "re-handing" me the same fanfictions from the beginning of the course as their first fanfictional draft. They should produce at least 2 drafts throughout the course.

Due to these factors, I changed the classroom dynamics and required from them one pre-writing draft, an edited draft and a final version of their fanfictional texts. Flower and Hayes (1981) stress the importance of modifying writing teaching goals. This modification may have been beneficial to the students as insofar they could compare their writing with previous ones and others.

7 CONCLUSION

The main goal of this study was to identify the challenges teachers and students may face in English as a Second Language creative writing classes. The participants were all Languages and Literature undergraduate students from a public university in São Paulo, Brazil. The results displayed significantly that both teacher and students had several difficulties.

The students were more interested in developing their own writing than following their teacher-researcher's course instructions. This motivated the reorganization of the course while being implemented. Moreover, most of the students' responses toward these creative writing classes indicated that the teacher-researcher should give them more opportunities to experiment different literary genres such as poems and flash stories.

Additionally, other substantial challenges were identified. Although all the students claimed they had B1 level, they presented basic difficulties in writing fanfictional texts in

English. They all overemphasized lexicogrammatical errors and did not consider the structure of the chosen literary genre.

Besides, they all exhibited a writing as a product approach, contradicting their writing as a process indicated in the preliminary questionnaire (BRADBURN, 2004) and in the first oral feedback session. (TARAS, 2013). This may have occurred, due to their lack of experience, and even motivation, in creative writing classes. Creative writing can be a very useful tool to help students develop their writing in English as well as their pedagogical skills. However, I suggest that the creative writing teachers should be more flexible and attentive toward their students.

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