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Facilitating students' creativity in an EFL writing classroom: Voices from the field

Heffy Dianawati
Al Azhar Islamic Junior secondary school 28, Indonesia

Herri Mulyono*
University of Muhammadiyah Prof DR HAMKA, Indonesia

Abstract

This article documents an English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom writing activity to promote students' creativity. This classroom writing activity had two main objectives: to provide students with writing exercises that would promote practical use of written English language as a means of communication, and to facilitate students' creativity in engaging with and solving problems in their social community. A real-world pedagogic writing task was developed to achieve these two objectives. The activity was carried out in a junior secondary school extra-curricular program with 16 students from Years 7 and 8. Students' perceptions of the writing activity were positive, and more importantly, their awareness of social issues in the community improved as students became engaged in meaningful communicative situations in their real social environment.

Keywords: creativity; classroom procedure; writing activity; learning English as a foreign language (EFL).

Resumen

En este artículo se documenta una actividad de clase de escritura de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) para promover la creatividad de los estudiantes. Dicha actividad tuvo dos objetivos principales: proporcionar a los estudiantes ejercicios de escritura que promuevan el uso práctico del idioma inglés escrito como un medio de comunicación, y facilitar la creatividad de los estudiantes en la participación y la resolución de problemas en su entorno social. Los objetivos se lograron mediante una actividad situada en el contexo real. La misma se llevó a cabo como actividad extracurricular en una escuela secundaria con 16 estudiantes de 7mo y 8vo año. Las percepciones de la actividad de escritura de los estudiantes fueron positivas, y lo más importante, su conciencia respecto a los problemas sociales de la comunidad ha mejorado, ya que los estudiantes se involucraron en situaciones comunicativas reales en su entorno social.

Palabras clave: creatividad; procedimiento de aula; actividad de escritura; el aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL).

TEACHING ENGLISH AS a foreign language (EFL) in junior secondary schools should aim not only to provide students with knowledge of and skills in the target language, but also to mediate meaningful target language use. The development of language learning tasks and materials should therefore address the context in which they are used (see Tomlinson, 2008a, 2008b, 2012). In this regard, students need to be given opportunities to participate in the real use of language and study "how language is used for communication" (Tomlinson, 2012, p. 159).

Creativity is viewed as a way of promoting meaningful language learning. According to Stepanek (2015, pp. 98-99), the inclusion of creativity in language learning activities helps teachers to provide students with varied expressions of the target language in accordance with certain communicative goals, to modify language learning lessons, and to engage students in close-to-reality situations. Furthermore, Maley (2015) suggests that the practice of creativity in language classrooms helps students learn the target language and respond to changes in their social lives. According to this author, creativity is an integral part of problem solving and critical thinking. Therefore, the inclusion of creativity in classroom teaching and learning practices may help to address social issues beyond the classroom environment.

Recent literature on creativity in EFL learning classroom practices has predominantly discussed the use of literature in the classroom (see, for example, Hewings, Prescott, & Seargeant, 2016; Maley & Peachey, 2015; Van, 2009). The range of classroom activities has included the use of drama (e.g. Boudreault, 2010; Galante & Thomson, 2016), creative writing such as poetry (e.g. Hanauer, 2012), short stories and fiction (e.g. Liaw, 2001) and storytelling (e.g. Heathfield, 2015; Ohler, 2013). However, classroom writing activities that promote creativity in language learning have not widely discussed in literature, specifically the use of creativity to address social issues beyond the classroom environment. It is thus the aim of this article to describe a classroom writing activity that included creativity to help students engage with social issues in their community by writing personal messages. This article explains the classroom procedure for the writing activity, and describes the school context and the students. The various stages of the activity are then presented, including the lesson plan and writing task, a survey of students' current skills, classroom activities and the distribution of postcards, before drawing some conclusions.

A Classroom Procedure for Promoting Creativity in EFL Writing Classrooms

The writing activity discussed in this article had two main objectives: (1) to provide students with a writing activity that would promote the real-world use of written English language as a means of communication; and (2) to facilitate the students' creativity in engaging with their social community and address particular issues in their society. For

these purposes, we adopted a process genre approach to writing, as proposed by Badger and White (2000). This approach combines a process approach and a genre approach to writing, in which a writing activity is attached to a social function, being undertaken in order to achieve certain communicative goals within a particular social situation. The development of a text should therefore consider "the subject matter, the writer/ audience relationship and organisation, channel, or mode" (Badger & White, 2000, p. 158) and should also go through a rigorous writing process, including pre-writing, drafting, composing, editing, and revising (Hyland, 2003; Susser, 1994; Urquhart & McIver, 2015).

The School Context and the Students
The writing activity was carried out as part of an extracurricular activity in an "English club" at a junior secondary school in Indonesia. The activity comprised three weekly sessions of 80 minutes each with sixteen students from Years 7 and 8 aged between 13 and 14 years old. It is important to note that these students had been learning basic level of English for three years prior to our writing activity. Students' participation in the writing extracurricular activity was voluntary, and consent from their parents had been obtained prior to the activity.

Writing Task
The objective of the writing activity in our classroom was to enable students to write messages on postcards using correct sentence structures. Specifically, the students were asked to write messages to their parents, relatives and people in their surroundings about the risks of smoking both to smokers themselves and to non-smokers in the vicinity of cigarettes. A lesson plan was designed to address these two main objectives and to guide the classroom implementation. A real-world pedagogic writing task was developed in accordance with the process genre approach applied in our classroom context. It was real-world in that it addressed students' communicative situations in their real social environment, and pedagogic because it was purposely designed to facilitate their knowledge of genre and their writing abilities (Hyland, 2003).

In the classroom, the students were asked to write messages about the potential risks of smoking on postcards to their parents, relatives or other people they cared about in their social community. The students in our classroom were already familiar with writing messages, particularly using social media. However, we opted to create traditional postcards, for which students used thick paper, pens, coloured pencils and other materials to create their designs. This was because we planned to let the students send the cards out to people in their social community rather than within the school.

In our writing classroom, the development of postcards extended the students'

creativity. Students were given opportunities to explore their ideas about several aspects, such as the content, shape, colours and fonts relating to the design of the postcards. These opportunities aimed to promote students' self-esteem and help them learn about making decisions, both of which are pillars of creativity (Read, 2015).

Survey

One week before the writing activity, we collected information about the students' strengths and weaknesses in writing. We asked them to write a short paragraph telling us about their daily routines. The results of the survey revealed that several aspects of students' writing required improvement, namely grammar, sentence structure and vocabulary. Therefore, the first writing session aimed to address these three issues.

Classroom Activities

Pre-writing Activities

Pre-writing activities were carried out to prepare the students for the main writing activity. These provided the students with opportunities to find ideas, gather relevant information, structure the ideas and information, identify the audience and purpose of the writing, and study relevant aspects of the genre (Urquhart & McIver, 2015), which in this case was a personal message. Three pre-writing activities were undertaken: learning scaffolding, brainstorming, and reading. The learning scaffolding activity aimed primarily to address students' weaknesses in the aspects of writing identified from our survey. The choice of learning scaffolding during the pre-writing stage was based on Hosseinpour and Koosha's (2016) findings, who examined whether teacher-led, whole-class scaffolding as a pre-task has an effect on the writing proficiency of EFL learners. Using an experimental design, 50 Iranian EFL female learners participated in their study, which revealed that such activities at the pre-writing stage help students improve the quality of their writing, specifically in aspects such as content, organisation and vocabulary, rather than grammar.

In our classroom context, at the pre-writing stage, the students were taught about several aspects of grammar, including gerunds and infinitives, parts of speech, the present tense, and aspects of formality and expression in language use. These linguistic resources would help students with the writing, and would also reduce their anxiety, thus promoting learning motivation.

Brainstorming was also included in our pre-writing activities. A body of literature on second- and foreign-language writing has suggested that brainstorming activities help learners identify topics for writing (Badger & White, 2000; Guleff, 2002; Hyland, 2003; Neumann & McDonough, 2015). This is because, according to Hyland (2003, p 9), writing is widely perceived as "an act of discovering meaning… and response

is a central means to initiate and guide ideas". In our classroom, the students were asked to discuss the issue of smoking in their social community, and its risks for both smokers and non-smokers. The discussion was conducted mainly in English and was surprisingly demanding, especially for the Year 8 students. We received many good and enthusiastic responses from the students, revealing a variety of social issues. In particular, they highlighted that many parents and relatives were active smokers and smoked near their children. The students commented that it seemed that their parents were unaware of the dangers of smoking to themselves and their children. This issue was then addressed in the students' writing.

The final activity in the pre-writing stage was a reading activity. The effect of reading as a pre-writing task on students' writing achievements is evident in the literature. Kintsch (1998, in Delaney, 2008) suggests that reading prior to a writing activity helps writers to "elaborate models of the text structure and situation, enabling them to select information from the source text, evaluate it, and use it for writing purposes" (p. 141). In our context, we asked the students to read some simple texts about smoking and its potential risks. We also told the students to list the effects they had found from the text, and to note the texts' vocabulary use and sentence structures.

In summary, these pre-writing activities helped the students identify topics for the writing, improved their knowledge of the schematic structure of personal messages, and provided them with linguistic resources such as vocabulary and sentence structure. With this knowledge and resources, the students were then encouraged to draft their own messages.

Drafting

Drafting plays an important role in the success of writing since it may minimise the writing blocks faced by all writers. Drafting is an early stage of production in which writers begin to set down their ideas in sentences (Urquhart & McIver, 2015). During this stage, we gave the students freedom to express their thoughts, emotions and hopes to their parents regarding the issue of smoking. In order to motivate them to keep writing, they were told not to worry about the quality of their texts at this drafting stage. Figures 1 and 2 present two samples of students' writing.

Figure 1. Writing sample from student A with teacher feedback.
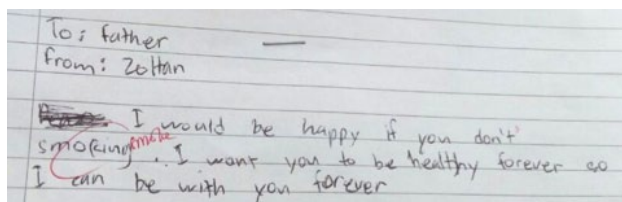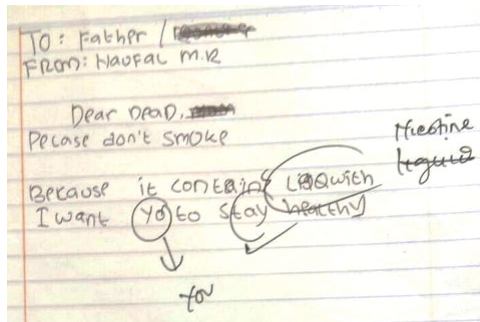
Figure 2. Writing sample from student B with teacher feedback.

During the drafting stage, one author monitored the classroom activity, supervised the students' writing progress, gave feedback and, most importantly, motivated the students to keep writing. With regard to giving feedback on the drafting stage, several studies on L1 and L2 writing have suggested that teachers' comments on preliminary drafts promote effective revision and increase the overall quality of students' writing (Ferris, 1995).

Editing and Revising
When the drafts were complete, the students were asked to edit and revise their writing. These two activities of editing and revising were intended to help them review all the information they had written, adding more ideas and removing any unnecessary parts of the text (Hamand, 2009). These activities were also intended to help students clarify the messages in their writing (Urquhart & McIver, 2015).

At this stage, the students were encouraged to work together, sharing their writing and commenting on each other's work. In addition to comments from their peers, the teachers also gave feedback during the editing stage. This feedback related mainly to problems of grammatical accuracy, diction and organisation of the writing. The students were asked to rewrite their texts based on the teachers' feedback.

Creating Postcards
Once they had finished their writing drafts, the students were asked to write the postcards. As mentioned earlier, this was intended to promote their creativity. During this stage, the students were given freedom to design a postcard and decide the layout. This was fun but challenging for the students, particularly in deciding on the kind of picture to draw, which they found difficult because they had to depict the message in their writing. We noted that the students sketched and re-sketched their pictures several times. Having drawn pictures to the best of their ability, the students then stuck them on one side of their postcards. Figure 3 shows two samples of students' drawings.

Figure 3. Samples of drawings from students C (left) and D (right).

Postcard distribution

As mentioned earlier, in addition to providing students with opportunities for real-world practice of English language use, the objective of this writing activity was to help them use their creativity to address social issues in their community. In particular, they were to use their postcards to convey the risks of smoking to their parents, relatives and other people in their social community. They called this postcard distribution activity the *Stop Smoking in Public* campaign.

When the postcards were ready, the students sent them directly to their parents and relatives. Many also distributed the cards to people at a car-free day event in the city. The students were excited to meet other people at the event and hand them the cards they had created. They also shared their thoughts about the risks of smoking with the people they met.

The students received various responses to their stop smoking campaign. Some parents appreciated their children's Stop Smoking in Public postcards and henceforth avoided smoking near their children, although, surprisingly, few parents decided to give up smoking. However, the students also received negative responses from some people who were approached while smoking at the car-free day. Although a few put their cigarettes out while talking to the students, others expressed their unhappiness.

Conclusion

In summary, all students who participated in the writing activity felt positive about it. They not only experienced the real use of English in a communicative event, but

also felt that their awareness of a social issue in the community had improved after participating in the writing activity.

Acknowledgments

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