ASSESSMENT OF CREATIVE WRITING: STUDY CONDUCTED AT SOUTH EAST EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: Writing as a productive skill is very important integral part in the language learning process. However, writing is not considered as an easy skill by the students and it is certainly considered a difficult skill to teach by many English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers. 'Creative writing normally refers to the production of texts which have an aesthetic rather than a purely informative, instrumental or pragmatic purpose' (Maley, 2019, p.2).The teaching and evaluation of creativity depend on how teachers understand 'creativity', how creative they are, and the environment that enables to apply creative methods in teaching. Creative writing in ESL classes has started developing lately but only to be incorporated as a supportive skill in teaching writing. Responding to students' writing is an important issue to discuss when considering teaching creative writing. Response is a process that includes peer review, peer editing and continuous feedback through the stages of creative writing. By giving a constructive feedback, the teacher understands writer's problems and intentions by also making students responsible for finding and analyzing what needs to be improved. Teachers of English need to make judgments and arguing that we cannot evaluate creative writing are an excuse that indicates the students that no piece of work is more creative than any other. For them the problem does not lie on what to ask the students to write about, but the problem is on motivating them to write creative pieces of writing texts. The teachers have to establish standards for evaluating and distinguish between efforts that reproduce sound organization, comprehensible opinion, capability to unite perceptions and persuasive arguments, and those who do not, or do it in a lesser degree. The English teachers have to develop criteria by which they can evaluate the quality of creative writing. The standards and expectations from the ESL students should not be very high, as they are in their native language, because the teachers' disappointment is inevitable in that case. May (2017, p.8) points out that 'the criteria set for evaluating writing depend on the purpose one wants to achieve'. Since the main purpose of creative writing is to achieve creativity in language, its assessment should focus on such features. Nevertheless, in most of the cases, teachers focus on correctness of grammar, syntax, vocabulary, punctuation and spelling.
This paper aims to investigate the criteria that creativity is measured by the teachers in the Department of English Language and Literature at the South East European University in Tetovo, North Macedonia. It will also examine challenges in designing valid and reliable instruments that will contribute to avoid any kind of subjectivism in evaluating creativity. This research will give insights into some interesting points that need to be taken into account in writing instructions.
Keywords: writing, creativity, feedback, assessment

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing as a productive skill is a very important integral part in the language learning process. It is a skill that ESL students are expected to master in a certain level of their language acquisition. However, writing is not considered as an easy skill to master by students and it is certainly considered a difficult skill to teach by many ESL teachers. According to Reid (1993), many ESL teachers used writing as a skill that only supported language learning. This assumption about writing led them to think that writing can be useful as a technique for adding interest or as a testing device for assessing grammar errors. Nowadays, writing has become an important communicative skill as a result of many researches that have been done on this field. ESL teachers have come to a level of recognizing writing as a skill equal to other integral skills of language learning and many of them have investigated different approaches to writing.

The importance of writing in EFL classes
As same as speaking, writing is the key to academic language success. From the early ages, students acquire the second language through words, continuing with sentences, paragraphs and longer papers. Therefore, they find difficulties doing so because most of the students find it hard to express ideas even though they have basic language knowledge. Facing such difficulties, when writing assignment takes place, students have little confidence which leads to different predictions and stereotypes about writing. This problem has been a topic for discussion for many language teachers and researchers due to the great importance of writing in language learning. "Each time I am assigned a paper I stuck in my breath as if I had to move a hundred-pound stone from the entrance to my apartment in order to go on living" (Bishop, W., 1990, p.26). Anxiety is what makes students reluctant to engage themselves into the writing process. The fear of not doing everything right makes them step back and teachers miss out on what

students really know. If students are free to express themselves, teachers will be able to see what they know and what they should learn in order to improve.

There are many contradictory opinions on whether controlled instruction in teaching writing should prevail or creative writing techniques should take over. A group of researchers would prefer to use them both interchangeably even though they might prefer one more than the other. Having looked at different researchers' views in this area of study, we as teachers can decide to choose which instruction is the most useful and fruitful in teaching writing. It is crucial to have in mind what writing really is and how we can enhance learning through the instruction of writing. "The view of writing as a tool for learning and not just a means to demonstrate learning is one of the major contributions of the research into the writing process" (Elbow, 1998). Therefore, if students are given the opportunity to use the target language in order to build their capacities to write, they will surely acquire the language at the same time.

Defining creativity in writing

The traditional approaches in writing have had a great impact on both teachers' and students' beliefs about how to teach and learn writing. Despite the fact that many researchers have reported positive results about the use of creative writing techniques, many teachers have been reluctant to adopt this method in the classroom. It must be noted that creative writing existed in theory way before it started to take place in practice. Considering that creative writing differs in many ways from traditional methods of teaching writing, it has been considered a challenge and an unfamiliar method that does not take into account important elements such as accuracy and precision in writing.

The movement from controlled to free or guided writing started in the early 1980s when teachers decided to embrace this new methodology (Reid, 1993). Creative writing as a writing methodology is characterized by the free expression of thoughts and ideas in a supportive and constructive classroom environment. It is also referred to as expressive or creative writing. This approach focuses on enhancing students' ability to express their creativity and to genuinely practice writing in an anxiety free atmosphere. The following techniques that demonstrate the above mentioned characteristics of creative writing include: writing a paragraph by describing a person or a place, writing a short story, writing an informal letter to a friend or a report about something you have read, writing about a given topic and writing by describing a picture. Moreover, there have also been discussions about creative writing as a way of boosting critical thinking. Crystal (2018) has argued that creative writing activities actually improve critical thinking among students since they are more based on their personal and emotional state, which gives them a sense of motivation. Elbow (1998) also supports the use of creative writing by giving arguments for its general application and by even recommending it for freshman writing courses, saying that students "need to practice nonacademic writing".

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Evaluating creativity in writing

"Feedback has long been regarded as essential for the development of second language (L2) writing skills, both for its potential for learning and for student motivation."(Hyland, K. & Hyland, F., 2006, p.83). Giving the wrong feedback may be discouraging for students' progress in creativity and the same may decrease their creativity. Responding to students' writings should be seen as a process itself and proper attention should be given due to its importance in their language learning progress. In most of cases, a piece of writing is analyzed as a final product and the main focus is on error correction. However, there is permanent question among the language teachers: Does error correction always help in L2 improvement in students writing? "One line of argument, influenced by process theories, claims that feedback on error to L2 students is discouraging and generally fails to produce any improvements in their subsequent writing."(Hyland, K. & Hyland, F., 2006, p.84). However, considerable number of researchers claim the opposite.

Considering different writing approaches, feedback is considered much more difficult with checking creative writing. What makes it difficult is that an idea that one finds creative may not be seen as such by another person. Another problem in measuring creativity is avoiding subjectivity and choosing the right criteria. "Self-report

measures of creativity and global assessments of students' creativity by others (such as teachers) have also failed to demonstrate sufficient validity to be trusted for most uses." (Baer, J. & Mc Kool, Sh., 2016, p.2)

Giving feedback on creative writing is thought to be very difficult since not everyone rates creativity in the same way. In addition, human nature judges based on feelings and a work which makes a change in people's feelings is worthier. To illustrate it better, Crystal, (2018) claim:

> It may be the case, then, that we make judgments of a set of work based upon the pieces that made us 'feel' the most. If we attach an emotion to a piece of poetry, then we should be able to remember that piece better and, further, to use it as an anchor for our judgments of other works by that artist. (p. 3).

What to focus on when giving feedback on creative writing? It is the hardest part for the language teachers. Creative writing positively affects language expression through writing which leads to a better general performance in that language. Students need to have access to this writing approach which seeks for the aesthetic and at the same time offers a relaxation both for the reader and writer. Whether approached in a traditional way or in a contemporary one, teachers should put the students' language progress as their main aim. With a lot of care, useful feedback should be provided so that students see the rights and wrongs and continue searching for their maximal performance.
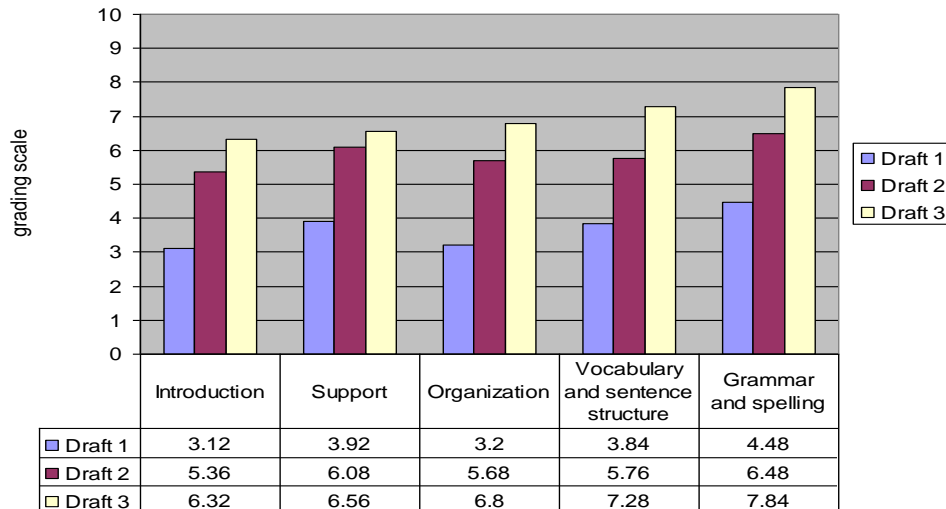
2. THE RESEARCH

Participants in this study were 3rd year students of the English department, South East European University in Tetovo. It was a group of 25 students who study English as a foreign language. They were given certain topics, such as writing a letter, writing a short story, writing by using pictures, etc. All of the in-class activities mentioned above were used according to creative writing techniques and no error correction was provided to students for any of them. The teacher's role during the flow of these activities was to be an observer, a supporter and a guide or a prompter. Students received more peer feedback rather than teacher feedback during the in-class activities. As a result of their group and peer work students were giving comments to each other related to the structure of ideas and the choice of vocabulary. Students received feedback from the teacher after they had read what they have written. The teacher feedback included appraisal for the good and strong points of the writing task and suggestions for improvement for the weaker points. It did not include error correction or correction related to mechanics. The students were evaluated for their progress they made in the following categories: Introduction, support, organization, vocabulary and sentence structure, and finally grammar and spelling.

Students' works were collected every week and after each class the students received teacher's feedback which was based on the following criteria:

Criteria	5	4	3	2	1	0
Creative Writing	Excellent use of imagery; similes; vivid, detailed descriptions; figurative language; puns; wordplay; metaphor; irony. Surprises the reader with unusual associations, breaks conventions, and thwarts expectations.	Some startling images, a few stunning associative leaps with a weak conclusion or lesser, more ordinary images and comparisons. Inconsistent.	Sentimental, predictable, or cliché.	Borrows ideas or images from popular culture in an unreflective way.	Cursory response. Obvious lack of motivation and/or poor understanding of the assignment.	No response.

Table 1. Evaluation criteria adopted from 'The HOT Writing Rubric' developed by Project Zero at Harvard University and by the Composition Program at the University of California, Irvine.

All three drafts submitted by the students have also been analyzed according to the analytic scale in order to follow students' progress through the actual instruction. Detailed results from drafts are shown in Figure 1. The following figures will show students' progress throughout the drafts in five categories as separate units and throughout drafts as whole essays.

	Introduction	Support	Organization	Vocabulary and sentence structure	Grammar and spelling
Draft 1	3.12	3.92	3.2	3.84	4.48
Draft 2	5.36	6.08	5.68	5.76	6.48
Draft 3	6.32	6.56	6.8	7.28	7.84

Chart 1: Draft results for all five categories

As shown in Figure 1, introduction has been evaluated with an average of 3.12 in the first draft. The average has increased in the second draft, that is, students have performed better in the second draft on their introduction with an average of 5.36. The third draft has also shown progress, increasing the average of students to 6.32. These results show a significant progress from the first draft to the second one where students have improved by about 2.24, whereas there is a slighter difference from the second draft to the third one of about 0.96. The overall difference from the first draft to the last one is 3.2.

In the category of support, students' performance in writing in the first draft has been evaluated with an average of 3.92 out of 10. There has been a significant increase in students' ability to provide support in their essays in the second draft where they scored an average of 6.08. On the other hand, less progress has been shown from the second draft to the third one, which has been evaluated with an average of 6.56. According to these results students have shown a progress of 2.16 points from the first draft to the second one, while the progress from the second draft to the third one has resulted in lower points of about 0.48. Even though there is no significant progress between the second draft and the third one, it must be noted that the difference between the first draft and the last one of about 2.64 shows considerable success.

In the category of organization, students' success is represented by an average of 3.2 in the first draft. The second draft showed a considerable difference with an average of 6.68. A slighter difference was detected from the second draft to the third one which has an average of 6.8. Nevertheless, students' progress in organizing their essays from the first draft onto the second one is very significant with a difference of 2.48 while the second draft differs from the third one by 1.12. It should also be noted that students' progress in the category of organization as well as in the first two categories has shown higher progress between the first and the second draft whereas the difference between the first draft and the last one results in 3.6, which is higher from the two categories mentioned above, especially support.

Vocabulary and sentence structure is the fourth category that has been analyzed throughout the three student drafts. In the first draft, students' performance as regards the vocabulary they have used and the way they have structured their sentences has resulted in an average of 3.84. The second draft has shown an increase with an average of 5.76 and following this is the third draft with an average of 7.28. In this category, students' progress is similar among drafts. There is a difference for 1.92 between the first and the second draft, while the progress between the second and the third draft shows a difference of 1.52. The overall progress from the first draft to the last one in this category is slightly higher than the previous category of organization, the figure being 3.68.

The fifth category which is grammar and spelling has resulted in the following outcomes. Students' average in the first draft for this category is 4.48, which is the highest average of all other categories for the first draft. The averages of the second and the third draft are 6.48 and 7.84, respectively. According to these numbers, the difference

between the first draft and the second one shows the highest progress of 2 points, whereas the difference between the second and the third draft is 1.36. Overall, students have progressed from the first draft to the last one by 3.36 which is approximately similar to the progress in the category of introduction.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research have not only revealed the expected outcomes but they have also given insights into some interesting points that need to be taken into account in writing instruction. Research on students' progress in writing has been an issue for decades and it has covered many important aspects in writing. The interpretation of findings for this research has shown similar results to some researches but different results to others. This could have been caused by the different nature of the sample that each researcher uses.

The results of this research demonstrate the need for other studies related to similar issues. If EFL students respond positively to creative writing instruction, it would be interesting to find out whether it has the same outcomes for adult learners of English as a foreign language. Other researches relying on the study of feedback by investigating it on a deeper level can also give more interesting insights in finding the proper way of responding to student writing. Teachers and educators should practice creative writing in order to have students produce a 'self work'.

The outcomes of teaching creative writing are enormous for language learners. Except practicing new vocabulary, students practice structure deductively and at the same time concentrate on the content.

Writing drafts and doing peer feedback are highly connected to the final evaluation. Teachers have the main say when evaluating creative writing. Using a certain evaluation chart is helpful both for the teacher and the student writer.

This study gives answers to several questions. The response to the question whether creative writing makes students better writers, is that it does. This does not mean that students who practice creative writing are able to do well on other writing approaches, but, it helps in creating writing habits.

Creative writing is also an approach of writing which finds a good place in literature. Creative writing which is also known as a poetic or artistic writing can help students become better writers.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a few things that are recommended for any further studies. Further studies are strongly recommended not to be focused only on the evaluation of creativity among English Language and Literature students, but students from other departments in the Faculty of Languages should be included in the research. The next studies in this field should enable teachers to understand the importance of creative writing and to encourage them to ask for it even in the classes where writing is not on the focus.

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