

# Theorizing on the Advantages of the Fiction Writing Workshop in the EFL Classroom, Part I

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The topic of creative writing in the English Foreign Language (EFL) classroom has been gaining popularity especially amongst literary-minded teachers and researchers of second language acquisition. While most creative writing studies in the EFL context have centered on the use of poetry and drama writing courses, little has been written on fiction writing, let alone on fiction workshops. This study aims to theorize upon the potential fiction writing workshops have on creative and critical faculties of thought, and how this applies in the acquisition of a second language.

多くのEFL/ESLの学生は英語による物語作りの便益を経験していない。その便益とは、文学の知識が広がること、言語スキルを活用すること、新たな言語の構造や語彙を学習することである。本論文では、概念から始まり、言葉、数行、物語へと段階的に発展する物語を学生がつくる方法の一つについての概要を示す。学生はこのプロセスを興味深く、無理のないものであると思い、物語りを共有する楽しみをもつことになる。

Keywords: creative writing, ESL, EFL, literature, process, scaffolding, stories

## Theorizing on the advantages of the fiction writing workshop in the EFL classroom, Part I

This study is a theoretical analysis of the class format and the student feedback in relation to student L2 acquisition and utilization. Points will be discussed which suggest a cooperative workshop format in fiction can help strengthen the L2 in learners. Fiction workshops make use of basic human behaviours in respect to storytelling and communication. Workshops are creative and critical cognitive exercises in the craft of writing and theory; language learning and socialization.

In the creative writing fiction workshop, students not only study and practice writing fiction, but also engage in critical discussion on each other's stories. At a minimum, students are involved in a sort of New Critical textual analysis as they question and provoke thought as to the logical use of fictional elements such as setting, character, and plot (to name a few), to

those creative works. Essentially, they are engaged in discussion on the successful or not-so-successful use of literary elements within the text. During critical discussions, opinions are shared, perspectives are debated, new words are sought out to express more abstract thoughts, and authors and classmates take co-creative roles in shaping each others' stories.

What is unique to the fiction workshop is that it takes advantage of the natural human need to create stories, and can contribute toward community building and socialization. In the creative writing workshop, this occurs through creating, sharing, discussing and re-creating stories; arguably the same narrative progression as in oral and print cultures, ancient and modern.

On a linguistic level, the fiction workshop involves utilizing the L2 to create stories and discuss them in English. Students use descriptive and emotional vocabulary in order to communicate nuanced meanings (Smith, 2013) essential to the

“spirit” of the work. In my own class questionnaires, the results of which will be discussed later in this essay, I asked students, “Overall, how do you feel writing fiction helped you with your English skills?”. The most common response related to vocabulary and expression usage. Essentially, creative fiction writing had an impact in targeting my students’ need to convey more precise abstract thoughts.

On a social level, the workshop format provided ample opportunity for discussion. Students also remarked on the importance of opinion sharing. Answers ranged from being appreciative of taking conversation skills beyond mere “chatting”, to a more logical and precise direction, to the importance of expressing and sharing opinions for the development of student English skills and story development.

One of the benefits of creative writing workshops, over a more literary course that involves critical discussion, is the “conversation” between the author and the reader. At work is a more primitive relationship, harkening back to the proverbial campfire, where questions and opinions are vocalized in response to the story. L2 student writers are able to “visualize” their English, not only in the context of their own imagination, but also in the imagination of the reader.

Another comment was that the student was able to see, through discussion, what he or she didn’t know they had written. In other words, the authors had revelatory moments when peer interpretations and critiques revealed unintentional elements (or a lack of certain elements) in the story. If the catalyst to any story is the reader’s imagination (Gotschall, 2012), then the reader’s imagination is the potential catalyst for the author’s re-imagination. As any writer can attest: there is value in an extra set of eyes to the critical and creative rethinking of a narrative. The writing workshop is a cooperative act between the author and the reader in narratological play.

### **Methodology**

The context of this study is a creative writing class consisting of six university students from different majors and different years. All students were within the intermediate range of English ability (as evaluated

by the author), and were able to express themselves on deeper abstract topics. Two students were second year students, two students were third years, and two students were fourth years. The objective of the class was to compose fiction and hold workshops for students’ fiction discussion and revision.

In the class, students wrote various freewriters. Freewrites are timed writing exercises where students are tasked with writing continuously on paper without worrying about content or grammar. The objective of the freewriting exercise here is to tap into the subconscious and see what interesting motifs or images appear. These motifs or images can later be used as starting points to begin new stories. Students in my course also wrote short exercises relating to fictional elements such as setting, character, plot, and point of view, then selected the exercise they liked most and revised it into a larger short story of approximately four hundred words. Students were encouraged to utilize the freewrites as starting points for their stories, however, considering the private and personal nature the freewrites tend to carry, I respected students’ privacy and did not require freewrites to be used or shared with classmates. This decision was made in the spirit of fostering a sense of safety in a course that has the potential to be a nerve-racking experience.

Before workshops were held, certain readings of flash fiction, or short-short fiction, which usually are narratives under 1000 words (though definitions vary), were assigned for homework and discussed in class the following week. This served to set the tone for future workshops. The emphasis of discussion on these published stories (the flash fictions) were focused on class lectures, i.e. mainly on setting, or character description. While these discussions were more literary (focusing on published works), they were not unlike the workshops that were held later in the course. All discussions focused on a textual analysis of the fictional elements as they applied to each student’s story or assigned text.

In discussions, students were provided with discussion questions. The questions were answered as homework in order to prepare for the following week’s discussion. In the case of workshops, they were

led by a Discussion Leader, a position which was re-assigned every week.

After each lecture, students were given several prompts to choose from and they wrote a short story of about 100-150 words, focusing on that fictional element covered in the lecture. During the weeks of these lectures, small workshops, in the form of groups of three, were held to help build confidence in the workshop format. One benefit was that the writers could get used to submitting their creative works to classmates, and readers could further practice critiquing, face to face with the author, and offer their opinions constructively.

After the phase of lectures and small group workshops, students were asked to select the exercise they were proudest of (or write something completely new) and revise it into a more developed short story of approximately 400 words. These stories were workshopped by the entire class, including myself, then re-written and submitted by the authors. Students re-wrote their stories one last time to polish their grammar, and the class concluded with a live reading of their finished stories. Questionnaires were then given to the students to complete regarding the class structure and their thoughts on how the writing and workshop format affected their English skills.

### **The workshop**

The methodological approach to the class workshops was more in line with traditional L1 beginner level creative writing classes rather than L2 writing classes. Since students had been lectured in the first half of the semester on various fictional elements, and produced short writing exercises from a prompt to help develop that fictional element, this approach was more abstract rather than linguistic. That is, the prompts I gave did not task students to make sentences on worksheets, where the sentences could be combined and arranged to form a story, but rather, I provided a task that required deeper inner exploration in order to elicit the vocabulary and grammar associated with the students' thoughts.

### **A note on the prompts**

One example of this approach was a prompt at the beginning of the semester, after a short lecture on setting. This prompt was an option out of three different prompts I selected from *Fiction Writer's Workshop* (1995) by Josip Novakovich. I asked for students to describe the town they grew up in. They had to think about such things as "streets, shops, schools, churches, rivers, bridges" (Novakovich, 1993). They had to focus on describing their hometown without letting their emotions into the writing. Students could choose any location and try to tell a little story that happened there, focusing mainly on the description of setting. I modified the prompt slightly from the original so that instead of it being a 2-page exercise, students only had to write between 100 and 150 words.

Most studies on fictional creative writing in the L2 have suggested that fictional writing exercises should not be conducted through writing prompts, which require a larger view of the topic and content. Instead, different forms of task-based worksheets are used that ask the student to focus, more narrowly by answering specific questions or focusing directly on the language of a prepared text. As in one case, mentioned by Simpson (1997), the sentences of a short story were jumbled up and groups of students were tasked with putting the sentences back together again, thus creating a new story. These student versions were "new" in the sense that none of the groups' stories were identical to each other or to the original text. In Simpson's case, this was a short vignette by Ernest Hemingway that the students were re-creating. This structured approach to creative writing is no doubt valuable to students and researchers. It provides a path towards a more quantitative analysis in stylistics as patterns can more easily be discerned (see Simpson's analysis on the Hemingway story).

In contrast, the use of introspective prompts, without the linguistic parameters to begin from, provides a platform for the students to utilize the L2 and immediately begin to construct creative connections (or imaginary worlds) from it. This is not to say that the more structured tasks are not valuable, but that the more abstract prompt requires another

aspect and skill of language learning that brings the student towards fluency. And for the researcher, provides ground for future qualitative research in the form of freer language use which brings together the creative and critical faculties. Furthermore, through a larger analysis of a larger group of writing workshop students, stylistic data can be interpreted by examining the patterns in these more “introspective” stories. The objective of the workshop class format, with its focus on abstract language usage, creative construction and critical investigation, is not to implant a specific track towards story and language into the student, but instead have the student work from a deeper space within, through minimal parameters, on a path towards discovery in the L2.

### Questionnaires

Students were given a questionnaire to collect their thoughts on the creative writing fiction workshop approach. In the questionnaire, six questions were asked that were directly or indirectly associated with the workshop. Part I of this essay is immediately concerned with the first three questions as they deal directly with the students’ English skill. Part II will focus on d-f, but the questions are provided here as an overview of the range of topics that will be theorized upon in relation to the workshop format. Part II will more closely cover class management indirectly associated with the workshop. These questions were (in no particular order of importance):

Overall, how do you feel writing fiction helped you with your English skills? Do you feel stronger in some areas? Weaker? Explain.

Were the workshops useful in helping you rewrite your story? Why?

Were the workshops useful in practicing your English discussion skills?

What would you change about this class?

Do you prefer a more formal class with a textbook? Or did you find the format of this class valuable? Explain.

Did you like the student-controlled discussions

(workshops), or do you prefer teacher-controlled lectures? Why?

These questions were asked with the intention of finding out what the students felt were the good and/or poor results of the workshop format. What effect did the workshop format have on the student’s English acquisition? What did the students learn about their English abilities? And what were their opinions on a more liberal, student-centered approach to English learning (Part II)?

### Results and discussion

In student responses to the first three questions of the questionnaire, many similarities emerged that addressed my own questions regarding the effectiveness of the fiction workshop. As alluded to in the introduction, question ‘a’ had 5 out of 6 similar responses (83%) regarding the acquisition and use of expressions and vocabulary. It is worth noting that the one student that didn’t address the change on their vocabulary and expression skills, addressed a different sort of effect; the way in which fiction helped with their creativity. The student writes, “By writing fiction story, I could imagine some situation. In fiction story, we can do anything” (student response). This I believe echoes Iida’s comment, when discussing writing within the L2, that most universities teach academic writing and expect students to write with grammatical accuracy rather than creativity (Iida, 2013).

The rigidity of academic writing often leaves little room for the playfulness of student language. Though students of the workshop must write with a level of accuracy in the form of spelling and sentence structure, fiction writing leaves room to use expressive, nuanced, non-core vocabulary (Carter, 1998; Smith, 2013). Non-core vocabulary being the nuanced variants of a core word which lacks emotional expression. Smith’s example would be for the core word, “look” and the non-core variants, “stared,” “gazed,” “glared,” “glanced” etc. However, in an academic setting, where the usage of these non-core words would be “wrong” depending on context, in fiction writing they can be quite memorable;

enriching to the text and experience of reading as non-clichéd language. One example, from a story by a student entitled “The Memory of a Car” (printed in a vanity publication I created for my students, 2013), in which an old museum-bound race car remembers the good times with its driver. The car narrates, “He was stoic for races but often wondered about me” (pg. 8). The driver, Peter from Germany, was “dedicated” to his races, but despite that, loved and took care of his car. In any other academic setting, “stoic” would be considered wrong as it is used in this sentence. However in fiction, it’s an interesting and memorable use of the word, and for fluent speakers, it can be a playful use of sarcasm or even over/understatement depending on context.

What fiction writing shows, in the way of creativity, vocabulary and expression usage, is that playing with the language is fine. In fact playing with language in the fictional medium may be closer to more fluent communication rather than stagnating at “academic accuracy,” which does not cover the spectrum of language as a whole, within its tight boundaries.

Question ‘b’ asks whether the workshops were useful in helping to rewrite the story. Students here answered positively, 6 out of 6 (100%). All answers touched on a common aspect of the workshop, and that was the cooperative relationship between the author and the reader(s). One student summed this up succinctly. The student wrote, “Yes. writer and reader is quite different. If I understand one thing as a writer, sometimes readers don’t understand. In workshops, I can find such things” (student response). In the workshop, the writer is allowed the chance to have a deeper discussion with peers about their own writing.

The effect of this advantage is further reflected in the additional comments students had in response to this question. One student specifically touched upon the aspect of constructive criticism. The student writes, “...Everyone gave me good advices. It was freely sensitivity” (student response). Constructive criticism is the ability to give advice in a way that is meant to help the person advance in their craft without being belittled by the giver of criticism.

The spirit in which constructive criticism is given, is in a way that is sensitive to the frame of mind and approach towards artistic or creative creation. The practice of constructive criticism in the workshop not only has the advantage of helping the writer re-imagine their story, or helping the reader develop skills of expression, but is also an exercise in cooperative community building. Albeit at a micro and fictional level, the workshop format has the added benefit of socializing the students in the L2 through discussion, and to some extent debate, on the elements of the fiction.

Cooperation and constructive criticism are building blocks to communal problem-solving. As Brian Boyd, literary evolutionary theorist states, “Fictions foster cooperation by engaging and attuning our social and moral emotions and values, and creativity by enticing us to think beyond the immediate in a way our minds are most naturally disposed—in terms of social actions” (Boyd, 2009, p.383). Boyd’s context is on storytelling in general; the teller and listener, writer and reader. However, I argue that the co-creative relationship in the form of discussion, and to some extent negotiation, between the art of the writer and the constructive criticism of the reader, goes beyond the realm of mere cooperation. I will say that an intrinsic socializing value to the fiction workshop is precisely in this “meta” spirit of blurred boundaries between the author and reader as co-creators. The workshop contains “meta” value, because like metafiction which engages the reader as an active participant in the text through self-referencing, the workshop too brings the creator and observer together in an active way, promoting communication, negotiation, and re-creation. The idea of the self-referencing of a text is important in metafiction because the text does not “pretend” to be real. Its fictionality has been revealed to the reader in the sense that the reader can see clearly that the text contains in its writing the knowledge that it is merely a text and isn’t presenting itself as truth. In much the same way, in the workshop as in metafiction, the text is presented without the illusion of realness by the author. That is, the author has invited the reader to a dialogue to help shape the story, and this simple

act serves to unmask the façade of realness within the fiction.

Metafiction is not so much a literary genre, but a literary tendency (Waugh, 1984) that among many boundary (and binary) subverting capabilities, often subverts or blurs the boundary between author and reader. This co-creative dialogue is in fact a dialogic act, in the Bakhtinian sense, in that the workshop “assimilates a variety of discourses (representations of speech, forms of narrative)—discourses that always to some extent question and revitalize each other’s authority” (Waugh, 1984, p. 6). Waugh here speaks of the novel, but it is easily re-contextualized to the workshop format as the metafictional element doesn’t change. In the workshop, the story is revitalized (or enlivened) through the narratological discussion; the dialogue about the text. It is this redistribution of creative authority to the group, if only for a moment, in re-imagining the fictional world of that momentarily live, breathing text, which hones the socializing cooperative/co-creative skills.

To further expand on student responses to question “b”, in the light of our metafictional discussion, are two similar student answers. One student writes, “At first, I couldn’t understand how I write a story. But, gradually, I could understand it” (student response). Another student writes, “The workshop tell me that what luck is it in my story. I realized my advantage and disadvantage of my story” (student response). This shows precisely the re-imaginative quality of the workshops. For the writers, they were able to understand how to better craft their story through form as well as content.

Question ‘c’ closely relates to questions “a” and “b,” and in some ways unites them. The question asked whether the workshops helped the student in practicing their discussion skills. All six students (100%) answered that the discussion format of the workshop was helpful. The importance of the student feedback for question ‘c’ however, is in the elaboration they provided.

Four students, (60%) mentioned the advantages in helping express their opinion. Of these four students, two of them hinted at an important issue in language learning: confidence. Both aspects, opinions

and confidence are important to this study.

In respect to the use of literature in the L2 classroom, Gillian Lazar, 1993, makes a “Methodological Assumption” (p.24), for literature as a path towards personal enrichment. She states in this assumption that literature helps students “draw on their own personal experiences, feelings and opinions” (P.24). That they are intellectually and emotionally engaged with the material, helping with acquisition; an “excellent stimulus for group work” (Lazar, 1993, p. 24).

This assumption is only one out of three that she makes. Next she gives some advantages and disadvantages, some of which deal directly with the assumption above. An advantage given, closely resembling the argument so far, is that literature students examine the linguistic element in the text, that they reach their own interpretations, may have to re-think their vocabulary and grammar in new contexts, and that this improves their overall knowledge of the language. In the fiction workshop, I believe, these advantages hold since the discursive component of the course is essentially a literary one.

Lazar (1993) cautions about asking for “[a] personal response from students without providing sufficient guidance in coping with the linguistic intricacies of the text. Some texts may be so remote from the students’ own experience that they are unable to respond meaningfully to them” (Lazar, 1993, p.25). This disadvantage is a valid concern when dealing with a literary format, and for good reason, since it requires opinions to be given about the text. However, this concern is somewhat alleviated in the fiction workshop, since students are in fact given the guidance and critical vocabularies necessary to express their critical opinions. The vocabularies centered around setting, character, point of view, and plot, amongst others are not only provided through lectures, but practiced directly by the student through informed creative writing and guided critical discussion.

The workshop then directly addresses the connection between confidence and involvement through student discussions. Although students expressed difficulties in stating their opinions (as

Lazar predicts), all expressed a recognition of the importance to state opinions during discussion. One student said it was difficult to do, yet “it was good training” (student response). Another student echoed that sentiment in stating that in giving opinions, though difficult, was helpful in helping them create their own stories (student response).

In addition, students expressed another valuable sentiment in regard to discussions, and that was the value of having dedicated discussion time. Discussion times averaged at about 45 minutes. One student remarked that the workshops gave a lot of time to speak and improve (student response). And another stated that they were able to think about what they wanted to say slowly and carefully. The dedicated time to discussion in the workshop format allowed for students to dig deeper, gather their thoughts, express themselves and gain confidence through these points as they contributed to an ongoing discourse.

### Conclusion

The creative writing fiction workshop has added benefits for the EFL literature class. On the one hand it maintains the critical discussion and abstract thinking that is necessary in improving L2 fluency. On the other hand, the workshop format addresses many of the concerns that are associated with the literature class.

The workshop establishes the tools necessary to begin crafting creative stories and discuss them critically. Students are provided with the questions and vocabularies necessary to explore the text. Creative writing in fiction not only allows the student to imagine situations related to the fictional elements and create stories, but also provides the foundation for formulating opinions on how classmates’ fictions utilize those elements. In other words, the workshop format promotes creative and critical thought processes and output, at the student level, and socialization, co-creation, and constructive teamwork at the group level.

In many ways, the fiction workshop, or literary workshop for that matter, can provide a balance and an approach worth experimenting with to address the concerns associated with the literary EFL classroom.

Though creative writing in EFL is not new, and many teachers enjoy providing activities that serve to stretch students’ creative horizons through creative tasks, the workshop format of discussing those creative texts provides an avenue for formulating and sharing peer and self assessment of creative output. And it is this sharing that socializes the students in the L2. They are in essence involved with re-imagining a world through dialogue, and this is perhaps the greatest addition to the literature class; they are involved with a “breathing” text that has not been finalized and canonized, but has yet to be fully realized and has been presented to the class because their opinions matter.

### Future research

The objective of this study is to create a dialogue as to the value of a fiction workshop in a second language classroom. The workshop format goes beyond mere creative writing, and goes beyond mere literary criticism in that the two disciplines are combined. This approach serves to hone writing and discussion skills, cognitive and social skills. It seems then that in an intermediate L2 classroom, the fiction workshop would provide an enriched experience in developing fluency. However, there is little research conducted on creative writing and much less on workshop approaches.

This study is focused on the experiences of 6 students. Perhaps this is not enough to analyze quantitatively, but as the volume of future research increases, it would be interesting to monitor and analyze the effects on student progress (immediate and lasting) on their L2 journey. What are the added benefits to a format that blends creative and critical thinking and output? What do students learn about themselves and their environment through such practices? What is the lasting impression on a student that is asked to co-create, construct, imagine and re-imagine in a foreign language? Is there divergence in the student levels from creative/critical backgrounds than a more traditional background through grammar and practice? The hope is that others will be curious enough to take on such approaches in larger classes and provide the data for larger analyses.

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## Author's Bio

John Wolfgang Roberts has a background in literature and creative writing, and is interested in their function in second language acquisition.