

# **EFL Creative writing: Using Literature as a Guide for Students' Writing**

**Iain Maloney**

*Nagoya University of Foreign Studies*

*maloney@nufs.ac.jp*

## **Abstract**

A questionnaire-based survey of students studying academic writing at a Japanese university highlighted a disconnect between the students' needs and expectations, and what was being supplied by the curriculum. 40 out of 132 said the course wasn't meeting their needs. 73/132 felt they couldn't express themselves in English and 57/132 expressed an interest in pursuing other forms of writing. Studies by R. Schrader (2000), Hanauer (2010), Iida (2010), Liao (2012), Bussinger (2013) and Pelcova (2015) have shown the use of creative writing to be beneficial to motivation and has advantages for L2 acquisition. Therefore, it was felt that creative writing might offer a solution to the problems raised by the questionnaire.

Two groups of undergraduate English majors at a Japanese university were introduced to creative writing via travel writing. They were taught a number of skills including writing dialogue, describing sensory input and how to construct an opening paragraph. This paper outlines the course methodology and by analysing student output, concludes that the programmes achieved their aims.

*Keywords:* writing, creativity, motivation, pedagogy.

## **Context**

In June 2017, in the initial stages of a larger study yet-to-be-published work, this researcher administered a questionnaire to second-year students in the Department of British and American Studies at a Japanese university. The aim was to ascertain attitudes towards the mandatory writing courses provided by the university as a precursor to redesigning the courses. The anonymous questionnaire contained 12 open questions written by this researcher. 132 questionnaires were returned. The key results are shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1

*Results of Questionnaire Survey*

Response	Number of respondents with this opinion	Percentage
I am unable to express myself in English.	73/132	55.3
Academic writing doesn't fulfill all of my writing needs.	40/132	30.31
I would like to pursue other forms of writing.	57 / 132	43.18

After administering a questionnaire-based survey, it was found that 30.31% (40) of the students felt that the current academic writing curriculum was not fulfilling all of their writing needs. For example, students mentioned email writing or writing reports in a business context. 55.3% (73) felt that they could not express themselves clearly in English. At the same time, 43.18% (57) of respondents expressed interest in pursuing other forms of writing. As a result, in order to explore whether this disconnect could be bridged, in 2017 the university gave permission to develop and trial a creative writing programme which was piloted with students in a third-year writing course. Following the success of that trial, the programme was repeated with second-year writing students in 2018. In both cases the programme ran for seven classes. In 2017 the classes occurred once a week for seven weeks in the autumn semester. In 2018, they occurred once every two weeks for 14 weeks in the summer semester.

All students were English majors who entered the university after both an entrance exam and a rigorous interview process in English and with a minimum TOEIC score of 550, an Eiken level of 2 or higher, or equivalent. The department adopts a communicative approach and classes are not streamed for level. The third-year students (2017 group) were already enrolled in an academic writing class and were of mixed ability, including some who had returned from studying overseas and some who were repeating the class. For the second-year students (2018 group) the creative writing programme was extra-curricular, running alongside their second-year academic writing programme.

The 2018 programme was substantially similar to the 2017 one, with small adjustments made to take into account language ability, expectations of writing ability based on their grade and

the fact that the voluntary nature of the 2018 programme meant attendance was sporadic. The lesson discussed in this paper only changed in one instance, which will be dealt with hereafter.

Based on the findings of the survey, it was decided that introducing creative writing could be a potential way to deal with the imbalance between their perceived needs and what they felt the academic writing courses were giving them. The question “Would you be interested in joining another writing class?” led to answers such as: “No, actually I don’t like writing...” or “I like to speaking than writing.” It was thought that creative writing might help counteract this antipathy towards writing, something that is supported by the literature which is discussed below.

### **Theoretical Underpinning**

Academic writing does not require students to express their own feelings (Maley, 2012) but creative writing is a useful tool in this regard. This was also shown by Liao & Roy (2017), who discovered that the expressive nature of poetry was appealing to their respondents. R. Schrader (2000) shows that by engaging in personal-oriented freewriting, immigrants to Germany learned how to express themselves in the L2 which led to “high motivation in language learning,” “great ease in dealing with writing in the second language” and “a positive emotional relationship to the second language.” (p.38-39). Liao (2012) discusses the disconnect between writing classes that focus on form and grammar and students’ ability to express themselves in the L2. She goes on to argue that by addressing this problem, motivation can increase.

Pelcova (2015) also argues that creative writing can “enhance their imagination, creativity, enthusiasm as well as motivation” (p.9). In the same vein, Maley (2009) mentions a rise in student self-confidence and self-esteem after engaging with creative writing. This is echoed by Bussinger (2013). Creative writing draws on students’ own experiences (Maley, 2012) and Sullivan (2015) argues that this will reconnect students with the work they are producing. Sullivan (2015) shows how creative writing allows students to feel they have a stake in the L2, and to feel that their writing has value to them, something which increases engagement in writing overall. This was echoed in this researcher’s own survey results when 55.3% (73) of students felt this was a significant weakness for them (see Table 1).

Finally, it is often thought that creative writing may be too difficult for students below the advanced level. M. Schrader (2000) argues against conflating accuracy with competence and turning language production into “mistake avoidance” (p.61). Liao & Roy (2017) mention this belief as being held by many students in the context of writing poetry. Their study shows that students have an inflated view of what poetry is and therefore feel inadequate to the task.

Hashimoto (2004), Spiro (2007) and Iida (2010) all show that this is a false belief, arguing that just as children can be inventive and creative in their native language long before they have reached a high level of linguistic knowledge and dexterity, so too can our language students. Creative writing can, in the words of M. Schrader (2000), “represent the opportunity of making the target language into the material of one’s own thinking” (p.59). One of the aims of trialing the programme with second and third-year students was to provide the department with evidence regarding the question of whether level and ability were a factor. Ideally, a trial with freshmen would also have been conducted but due to logistical and scheduling obstacles, this has so far proved difficult to achieve.

### **Overall Programme Structure**

Given the fact that both the 2017 and 2018 classes had never been exposed to creative writing, it was decided that creative non-fiction would make for a smoother transition than fiction because creative non-fiction shares structural features with the kinds of papers they had experience of writing. Therefore, the class focused on travel writing because students at this university have a high expectation of studying abroad for 6-12 months and the majority experience studying abroad for a minimum of five weeks during their degree programme. In addition, many travel abroad during their vacations. As a result, it was concluded that travel writing would be a genre with which the students would feel comfortable.

To overcome any potential feelings of anxiety, the programme began with the students telling their classmates about either a positive or negative experience they had encountered while travelling. This was the kind of activity in which they had taken part numerous times across their communication classes. The students then analysed the reactions to their stories, highlighting, for example, whether amusing anecdotes had been met with laughter or whether their negative experiences had provoked responses of sympathy. This was done to focus their attention on the reader or audience of any story. In the second class we looked at ways of describing sensory input such as sights, sounds, smells and touch (e.g., temperature, physical strain) and brainstormed details from the setting of their own anecdotes. In the third class, described later in this paper, the focus moved to opening paragraphs. In the fourth, the emphasis was on writing dialogue. The fifth, sixth and seventh classes were workshops in which the students expanded and drafted their work, with editorial input from the teacher and their peers, eventually turning a brief anecdote into a fully-formed piece of travel writing.

## Method

### Opening Paragraph Lesson

The 2017 group had spent at least two years studying academic writing (more in the case of repeaters and returnees), while the 2018 group had been learning to write academically for a year. Therefore, it seemed that examining opening paragraphs of actual travel writing would be a comfortable bridge for them between the formal rigors of a research paper and the structurally fluid world of creative writing. The process would give them concrete examples of what they were expected to do (in terms of direction if not quality), a reference point from which to embark. The use of models in teaching creative writing has a long history and can be seen in textbooks such as Diane Thiel's *Winding Roads: Exercises in Writing Creative Nonfiction* (Pearson, 2008). The students' first year writing curriculum focused heavily on learning how to write thesis statements, hooks and supporting paragraphs and so it was decided to present creative non-fiction to them in a similar way, again providing comfort through familiarity.

Table 2

#### *Writing Samples*

Author	Title	Publisher	Page	Paragraphs
Banks, Iain	<i>Raw Spirit</i>	Arrow, 2004	69	2-3
Bashō, Matsuo (Translated by Noboyuki Yuasa)	<i>The Narrow Road to the Deep North</i>	Penguin, 1966	97	1-2
Carey, Peter	<i>Wrong About Japan</i> by	Faber, 2004	21	3-5
Cracknell, Linda	<i>Doubling Back</i>	Freight, 2014	183	1-2
Garland, Alex	<i>The Beach</i>	Viking, 1996	5	1-2
Murakami, Haruki (Translated by Iain Maloney)	<i>Moshi bokura no kotoba ga uisuki de attanara</i> [If Our Words Were Whisky]	Shinchosha, 1999	10	1-2

On one B4 page, I presented the opening passages above. These were chosen because

each offers an interesting approach to beginning a piece of travel writing. Many other opening chapters would work just as well, however, a strong contrast between examples is required. These samples were chosen to highlight specific techniques. As is discussed below, one aim of this lesson was to connect techniques in creative writing with techniques the students had already learned in their academic writing class. For example, in creative writing an opening passage can act as a thesis statement, introducing the main theme or topic of the piece.

The passage from Carey's book, for instance, opens with the author and his son meeting a character called Takashi for the first time, offering a detailed description of this unusual man without any context or explanation as to his identity or relationship with Carey.

In Tokyo's Harajuku district one can see those perfect Japanese Michael Jacksons, no hair out of place, and punk rockers whose punkness is detailed so fastidiously that they achieve a polished hyper-reality. Takashi had something of this quality. (Carey, 2004, p.21).

By beginning in this way, Carey is, in essence, writing about people, characters, personal interaction and human relationships. The geography, architecture, smells and sounds of Harajuku are less important than the people Carey and his son will encounter.

Garland's novel, however, dwells on the sensory nature of Bangkok's Khao San Road, describing the smells and sights, both licit and illicit.

...there were long-distance telephone booths with air-con, the cafes showed brand-new Hollywood films on video, and you couldn't walk ten feet without passing a bootleg-tape stall ... I caught the smell of grass as soon as I got out of the cab. (Garland, 1996, p.5).

The novel, we can conclude immediately, is going to be heavily focused on location, setting, sensory input and experience.

The extract from Cracknell's book showcases her concern with the interaction between hiker and environment. Banks's is a rattling introduction that gets the reader up to speed and on the road in a few fast sentences, while Murakami's dwells on past travels and his quirky habit of assigning himself some mission for the trip, such as only eating *udon* while in Niigata or pancakes in America. Each one offers a different approach to opening a piece of travel writing from the other

samples, and can be used to illustrate the author's intentions in an easily understandable way.

Students were given the hand-out and a second worksheet which asked them to make notes on setting, when in the story the passage began, which characters were present, what information the author provided first, what was described (place, character, emotions, etc.) and finally what information they thought was being deliberately kept from the reader. This was done in order to focus their attention on what could be included in an opening paragraph but also what could be left out. One of the biggest obstacles to beginning any piece of writing is knowing how to start. Thus by examining how these six writers had done it, it was hoped that the students would not be terrorised by the blank page when their turn came. The 2017 group were given all six openings. The 2018 group, due to level and time constraints, were only given three (Carey, Garland and Murakami). Once the students had made notes for each sample, they reconvened and shared their thoughts in small groups. Once the students had shared their opinions, they participated in a group feedback session and on the white board a table focusing the students' attention on the answers to the questions concerning when in the story the book opens, what is described and what is kept from the reader, was constructed. The rationale for focusing on these three aspects is examined below.

In the 2018 class, the table looked like this:

Table 3

*2018 collected student notes.*

	Carey	Garland	Murakami
When	In the middle	At the end, then quickly jumping back to the beginning	Before the trip has begun
Described	The appearance of Takashi	Khao San Road, sights, sounds, smells, touch, atmosphere of the area	Murakami's 'missions' in the past and his 'missions' for this trip.
Secret	Who is Takashi? Why is Carey and his son meeting him in Harajuku? Why are they in Harajuku?	What beach? [The book opens: "The first I heard of the beach was in Bangkok" and then never mentions the beach again for two paragraphs]	Any details about the trip.

The following conclusions were then highlighted:

1. “It’s clear from the table that the authors can start their story anywhere they want: beginning, middle or the end. Each choice has a different effect on the reader. Therefore, you can also begin as you like according to the effects you hope to have on your readers.”
2. “You can start with whichever details you want, but your choice indicates the emphasis of the ensuing story. In other words, Carey’s book, by focusing so directly on a single person, tells us that his story is going to be about people – himself, his son and the people they encounter in Japan. The physical reality of Thailand is going to play an important role in Garland’s novel. On the other hand, Murakami’s story is going to be centred much more around his and his wife’s experiences and feelings than around Scotland and whisky. Therefore, you, as writers, have to think about what is most important to your story. If it is the characters, then it is best to open with a person front and centre. If it concerns a place, begin with a description of the place.”
3. “Each paragraph contains a thesis statement and a hook.”

This third point is the rationale behind focusing on “when,” “what is described” and “what is kept secret,” as shown in Table 3. As mentioned above, the students were familiar with the concepts of thesis statements and hooks from their academic writing. These concepts were elicited and the students were asked to find examples of both in the opening paragraphs. In both the 2017 and 2018 cases, the students reported that there were no hooks or thesis statements. The students were directed to turn their attention to the opening sentence of *The Beach*: “The first I heard of the beach was in Bangkok, on the Khao San Road” (Garland, 1996, p.5). It was pointed out to them that while the opening sentence mentions the beach, the rest of the passage describes the Khao San Road. In fact, the beach isn’t mentioned again in the whole passage. It was explained to them that in creative writing it can be the absence of information that acts as the hook, not the provision of it. The row in the table entitled “secret” could then be renamed “hook.” They were then told that the opening sentence could also be considered a thesis statement, since the remaining 448 pages would be about the beach mentioned on page one. While the thesis statement and hook did not take the form they were accustomed to from their academic writing classes, the concepts were still relevant and present in creative writing. The lesson and the previous classes were recapped, and the task of writing their own introductory paragraphs as homework for the next class was set.



## Qualitative Discussion of Selected Results

The following week (two weeks later in 2018) students returned with their paragraphs. Below I will show examples of what they produced as homework. Their names have been changed; the errors have not.

Mieko:

“Not only did I miss orientation, other international students must be shopping for necessities as we speak”. My head was filled with these thoughts as I waited for my suitcases at the baggage claim area. I should have already been in America a day earlier; but having been unable to take the plane I intended to take, like a lost child separated from her mother because there was no Asian around me, I stand looking like a pitiful thing. Finding my suitcases, with the fluorescent yellow stickers, I took them and headed to the taxi counter to find a ride to the university.

Mieko was an excellent student, already receiving A grades (80-100%. The average for the class was B (79-79%) but her writing until this point had been stilted, without colour or passion. Mieko’s worked showed a depth of language and a facility with imagery that hadn’t been clear from her more academic work. The lesson did not just benefit the highest achieving students; Takuma was less developed as a writer and struggled with the academic writing course. His grades were firmly rooted around C minus. For example, the final draft of his essay prior to the travel writing began:

In many countries, the population of immigrants is increasing, and there are many problems in these countries. How about Japan? Are immigrants to Japan too low? Recently, in Japan also the number of foreign people is increasing.

After corrections, edits and redrafts there are still grammatical errors and unnatural formations. However, Takuma’s opening paragraph shows real progress:

I have a funny story. It happened in my friend’s house about 10 years ago. One day, my brother and I planned to go to my friend’s house. My friend lives in the foot of the mountain so we went to the forest, and explored there. It was very exciting. The

smell of grass and soil were comfortable for my nose. The color of leaves and ground made my eyes happy.

There are still level markers, but there is an engagement that was not there previously. The vocabulary is more varied and the sentence structure more adventurous. In his academic essay on immigration Takuma rarely strays beyond single-clause sentences: “First, the population of immigrants in Japan. The population of foreign people are increasing year by year.” When he does lengthen his sentences, it is only with simple connectors: “It was decreased once because of disaster and so on, but it is increasing again year by year.” In his travel piece there are still many short sentences but in each paragraph there is at least one attempt at a complex sentence: “The touch of ground was very good because it was so soft that I and my brother could not feel so much in everyday life.” “My brother and I plucked up our courage, we two climbed up the wall like my friend did, and my friend pulled us up.” As can be seen in these examples, there is also an attempt to render emotional and sensory experiences using phrase like “plucked up our courage” and “the touch of the ground.”

These paragraphs were the first instances either student had written anything in this style or genre, so to produce writing of this quality was unexpected. However, by explicitly linking the examples in class to what they had produced in their academic writing via the group feedback session and the table drawn on the whiteboard, it bridged the gap between what had gone before and the new genre they were moving into. Mieko’s example in particular shows clear signs of influence from the lesson – she has started in the middle of the story and allows the situation to speak for itself. She hooks the reader with the tantalising scent of some disaster having befallen her but withholds details until the dramatic moment is reached. She is focusing on physical details that echo her emotions at the time, such as the fluorescent stickers which reflect her own feelings of standing out as “a pitiful thing.”

By looking at the grades given, the work the 2017 group produced marked a significant improvement from the academic essays they had been writing before. While the average grade had been between C- and B (60%-75%), the average grade for the class for their travel writing was between B and A (75%-85%) based on a grading rubric which had been developed for this programme. The majority of students moved up a whole grading band. Without further study there is no way of ascertaining whether this increase would have happened anyway as a result of natural progression and development, but it does suggest a potentially positive avenue. As the 2018 group were taking the class as an extra-curricular option, no grades were awarded.

## Conclusion

The 2017 and 2018 programmes succeeded in their aims. By leading the students through the literature and the choices those authors made, the students were able to apply the techniques to their own work. By focusing on opening paragraphs and the different approaches other writers used, and by linking those techniques to ones they had learned in their academic writing classes, this lesson acted as a bridge between academic writing and creative writing. Their engagement with the subject matter and the experience of expressing their own feelings and thoughts seems to have motivated them. However, further study needs to be done to quantify this improvement and to determine whether there is in fact a trend.

As James (2007), M. Schrader (2000), and Liao (2012, 2017) describe, it is often thought that creative writing is a subject best reserved for elite students. Instead, we see in studies by Hanauer (2010), Iida (2010), Liao (2012) and Pelcova (2015) that creative writing allows students to explore their second language using skills and their existing English knowledge. This study also goes some way towards supporting that conclusion. By deploying literature as the model and guide, through lessons like this we can help students to a deeper understanding of their own language skills and deal with problems of demotivation and low self-confidence.

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