Conference report

Creative Writing in Language Teaching Contexts

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Creative Writing in Language Teaching Contexts was a one-day event hosted by the Literature in Language Teaching Special Interest Group (LiLT SIG) and Tokyo JALT on 29th November 2020. Though the event was due to take place live in April, the spread of COVID-19 necessitated the rescheduling and change to an online format. The theme of the event was applying creative writing to the language classroom and the approaches of five speakers who effectively teach creative writing as a means of acquiring and producing the target language, which in each case was English.

This report will first briefly introduce creative writing as a pedagogy in itself and as a complement to the language classroom. It will then report on the talks of five speakers who apply creative writing pedagogy and practice to their second language (L2) classes. Their talks and workshops are summarized to provide practical solutions for any EFL teacher who wishes to include creative writing in their language classes.

Creative writing (henceforth referred to as CW) as an academic discipline is deeply established in the field of humanities, though it is comparatively underrepresented as a medium to enhance the language classroom. Recent arguments for its place in the ESL classroom have focused on its capacity to help learners appreciate English as a communicative tool. Although Maley (2009) recognizes the limits of the communicative approach to language teaching, he maintains that CW not only facilitates the acquisition and production of language-learning fundamentals such as grammar and vocabulary, but also encourages the learner to experiment with those forms. They can engage with language playfully, exploring its malleability and limitless possibilities to help them express themselves. In other words, CW can expand the boundaries of learner perception and pedagogical approaches of English communication.

Kelan (2014) argues that CW is essentially a Freirean pedagogy: dialogic and emancipatory, encouraging learners to explore their voice and identity toward a transformative awareness of their non-L1 voice. However, with this limitless potential comes criticism that a free pedagogy constitutes an undisciplined pedagogical approach. Perhaps, as a result, CW is an underused approach in the Japanese EFL classroom. Maloney (2019) asserts that curricula bias toward "academic" modes of education and assessment may contribute to instructor reluctance to teach any form of creativity. Another argument to consider is teacher apprehension due to a lack of practical education in the area. Most universities in Japan require instructors to hold postgraduate certificates in TESOL or applied linguistics and rarely emphasise the benefits of interdisciplinary training. These TESOL programs very rarely provide opportunities to learn about the application of creativity in the classroom.

With these obstacles often resulting in language teachers in Japan rarely attempting CW activities in their classes, students are missing out on rich opportunities to explore the target language as well as their voice and identity.

The presentations are presented in the order they were given.

"The Description of the Crocodile was Real Good:" How Stylistics can Facilitate Discussion in the Creative Writing Workshop, by Luke Draper

Luke Draper is an associate lecturer of English at Kwansei Gakuin University, specializing in writing pedagogy and materials development. As well as working full-time as a lecturer, he is currently completing his Ph.D. on CW workshops and L2 language learning. The presentation title was taken from a participant at the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, famous for its notable alumni and colourful history. Weaving together the story of the Iowa CW workshop and his research interest in CW provided a valuable depth of perspective at the start of the day.

In the first part of his talk, Draper explored connections between stylistics and CW, as previously researched by Scott (2013). Using examples from Simpson (2004) and Toolan (2013), he illustrated how excerpts from texts could be used to provide a setting for a story and help to allow for orientation to the next stages of CW. Raymond Carver's short story *Cathedral* was used as an example of this technique, focusing on the linguistic narrative choices in the text. The key to successful inspection and exploration of texts in this way is the use of techniques from the field of stylistics. By guiding students through a text to enable understanding of narrative features and lexical cohesion, workshopping with literature can enable meaningful interactions with the text and help empower students to write their own creative works.

Next, Draper moved on to his central question, that is, "How does Stylistics benefit the CW workshop in an L2 context?". The talk explored various facets of this question and gave some tentative answers which support the position that stylistics is a naturally effective way to enhance the CW workshop. One interesting and potentially divisive aspect of the CW workshop is the dialogic nature of verbal critique. Draper explained what this might mean in different teaching contexts, including with L2 learners. Traditional uses of workshopping techniques such as reading aloud what they have written should consider learners' willingness to accept such boundaries. Simultaneously, it may be wise for teachers to be flexible when working with the so-called "gag rule" (typically part of a CW workshop during which time participants listen silently to other participants critiquing their work). Participants in the session were particularly interested in this aspect of CW workshops, with questions in the Zoom chat asking for suggestions on how teacher feedback or student interactions may be effectively managed.

As for pedagogical implications, there were several emerging themes of interest for teachers in Japan interested in CW. Draper's particular focus was to discuss stylistics as a way of connecting CW with L2 learning. Stylistic analysis using deixis and syntax examination may be particularly useful for learners working with short forms of poetry in Japan, for example. He emphasised the need for the craft of CW to be "explicitly taught", which he explained means linguistic, stylistic and narratological metalanguage. Finally, Draper's summary provided concise guidance for practitioners wishing to implement creative writing activities for L2 language learning.

Reading to Write, Writing to Read, by Cristina Tat

Cristina Tat delivered a presentation on the practical implementation of a CW curriculum. Referring to her current teaching context of the School of Policy Studies at Kwansei Gakuin University, she discussed the development of a special topics course that is part of a coordinated English program at the university level. This course makes use of extensive reading, based on Day and Bamford's (2002) tenets of extensive reading, especially, "... pleasure, information and general understanding".

Tat drew on her own childhood reading experiences for inspiration, and fondly recalled the joys of reading the colorful French comic book *Pif*. Reflecting on this experience, she realized the importance of aesthetics in reading. This point of view is supported by Kuzmicova (2013) who wrote of the "vicarious sensorimotor experiencing [of] mental imagery…a powerful source of aesthetic enjoyment in everyday life and, reportedly, one of the commonest things readers remember about literary narratives in the long term" (online abstract).

Students usually read from a selection of fiction books that she hand-picked for the course library. However, during emergency remote teaching (ERT) due to the pandemic, students were unable to borrow books from the university library, so they read books from Xreading, which has a slightly different makeup of titles. During each class period, students take part in Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), and Tat models the activity by reading alongside the students during this time. Instead of requiring students to take quizzes to show that they have read the books, they complete reading logs, participate in book discussions, and other engaging activities.

Students use the books they have read as models for elements of their own stories. They mine the text for examples of the creative writing techniques that they study in class. For instance, when students study how dialogue functions in stories, they look to the graded readers for concrete examples, and through this process of reading and noticing, they become more aware of the conventions of creative writing. Other areas of study include sensory imagery, dialogue, and character development.

In the writing portion of the course, students complete weekly writing assignments and write their own stories. Peer review sessions were conducted to provide feedback on stories written by students. She shared some examples of student comments from peer reviews and mentioned that this activity became anonymous when conducted online due to ERT. This may have helped students to participate more frankly in discussions about their classmates' work.

In conclusion, Tat aims to use creative writing and extensive reading in tandem so that students can engage more meaningfully with texts and develop an interest in reading for pleasure.

Creative Writing in the Era of COVID-19 Pandemic by Atsushi Iida

Atsushi Iida is an associate professor of English and the Chair of Foreign Language Education at Gunma University. His presentation explored various facets of how poetry writing in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching context has been a varied and different experience in 2020. It aimed to contextualise and reflect on issues arising from changes in the teaching situation and explore how the pandemic has impacted interactions with students writing poems in their English classes.

From a teacher-researcher perspective, Iida began by outlining the challenges 2020 has brought for students and teachers in teaching environments. Graduation ceremonies in March were cancelled, along with guidance sessions for new students. The most significant impact has been on first-year students, who were unable to participate in opening ceremonies. Instead of having the typical first-year experiences in class on campus, they spent their time learning online throughout the year. These reduced opportunities to make new friends led many students to report negative emotions and show signs of stress. For teachers, the situation has been different but has mirrored students' stressful experiences this year. Mixed feelings of guilt, frustration, and even fear may need to be carefully navigated by the creative writing teacher in these troubling times. With these things in mind, Iida discussed how L2 learning experiences in 2020 had been affected by the pandemic.

Iida utilizes a *meaningful literacy practice* approach (Hanauer, 2012), which he explained means to use writing activities in the language classroom to focus on the uniqueness of language learners: their experiences, language learner histories, and their social context. Activities such as autobiographical writing use the target language to express *voice*. He defines voice in his earlier work as "the articulation of [writers'] personal needs, interests, and ideas - in a social context that presumes an *audience* - the teachers, classmates, and even the community at large" (Iida, 2010, p.28 quoted in Iida, 2020). Iida's continued interest and the focus of the talk was the central question of "How can we teach voice in L2 writing?"

The presentation utilised interactive discussions with participants joining breakout rooms to share perspectives on reading a poem written this year in response to the pandemic. In the latter part of the presentation, Iida illustrated how poetry writing works as meaningful L2 literacy practice through adapting his materials for the particular situation of 2020 (cancelled ceremonies, online learning, the wider societal impact of the pandemic). His course materials include activities to explore poetry and poetic writing, reflective writing, free writing, and translation activities (from L1 to L2). The final stage of writing poetry brings together all of these aspects.

The talk finished with some conclusions and future research areas for poetry writing in the Japanese EFL classroom. These points may be relevant to teachers working with different levels of language learners, not only university students. Iida's message was that poetry and L2 writing involves reflective practice and literacy practice, focusing on meaning construction.

Language learning contexts have always presented opportunities for emotional interactions, for example when learners write about their feelings. However, there has been something markedly different about exploring the pandemic with students while the pandemic is happening. Among the challenges of 2020 is the uncertainty that the news cycle and students' experiences may bring to the language classroom. Creative poetry writing has the potential to explore emotional topics in meaningful ways.

A Bit of a Character: Building Voice in Fiction with L2 students, by Iain Maloney

The fourth speaker, Iain Maloney, is an author with three novels, a book of haiku and a memoir to his name, and also a lecturer at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies where he teaches CW. He delivered a workshop that focused on activities designed to stimulate characterization in fiction writing tasks.

Maloney began his talk by contextualizing his teaching practice: He teaches CW to third-year students as an elective course. He introduces the students to creative non-fiction and travel writing as a means of familiarizing them with the form of story-writing. He then teaches scriptwriting, which introduces his students to dialogue, using activities such as listening to and transcribing peer discussion to recognize natural interaction. Next, he teaches poetry, which familiarizes the students with poetic devices such as metaphor, imagery, and meter. Finally, the three genres are synthesized in a fiction-writing task. The main difference between fiction and creative non-fiction, Maloney asserts, is that fiction requires student-writers to consider character and plot more resourcefully. While many creative writers tend to write in first-person and as themselves, Maloney explores different voices in his own creative writing and draws on this experience to encourage his students to experiment with characterization themselves.

Maloney demonstrated two activities he uses in class to activate his students' imagination in terms of character. The first activity was an open ethnographic survey about a character his students would create for a short story. The questions ranged from the character's name and their hobbies to their favorite flavor of ice cream and whether they like to visit museums. Students are encouraged to be creative with the answers and to not answer with information about themselves. Maloney stressed that much of the information from the survey may not be used in the final text, but that it helps the learner identify with the character they are creating by breaking the character down into constituent parts.

The second activity was a letter-writing task, in which student writers must write to themselves as their character. Maloney recommended this activity as it allows the student to explore the voice of the character they have created. It also forces the learner to write from the character's perspective as they are essentially writing a letter to themselves.

To help illustrate the importance of characterization in fiction writing, Maloney provided an anecdote about his own writing. He tried writing from the perspective of a sixteen-year-old female, but realized that in one scene, when the character is creating a mixtape of music for a party, the character's musical taste was similar to his own. This led to the realization that the character, though different in age and gender, was merely an extension of Maloney's personality. After using similar activities to the ones introduced in his talk, Maloney created the character to not like music at all and to play a generic pop compilation album at the party, an antithetical action to what the author would do. This not only encouraged Maloney to explore alternative voice and characterization to inform his writing, but to also encourage his students to do the same. The two activities demonstrated in his talk provide a step-by-step approach to motivate students to also explore different characters and voices.

Creative Writing in the EFL Classroom, by Suzanne Kamata

Suzanne Kamata is an award-winning author and associate professor at Naruto University of Education in Tokushima Prefecture. Some of her most recently published books are *Pop Flies, Robo-Pets, and Other Disasters* and *Indigo Girl*. She began her presentation by discussing educational goals, referring to objectives from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) that are relevant to creative writing: guidelines for "developing individuals' abilities, cultivating creativity, and fostering a spirit of autonomy and independence" (Basic Act on Education, 2006), and cultivating a "zest for life" (MEXT, 2008). She introduced various creative writing activities, including poems and mashups, and outlined methods to provide meaningful feedback to help students revise their work. At the end of the session, participants had the opportunity to try some of the activities and share their writing with the group.

Kamata introduced two kinds of poems that she has used in the classroom: cento and abcedarian. To write a cento poem, students choose lines from already published poetry and assemble these in fresh ways to create original poems (see Kamata, 2016). The second type of poem, the abcedarian poem is a "poetic form guided by alphabetical order" (American Academy of Poets, n.d.) with a long history. Such poems open with a word beginning with the letter a, continues to the second line with a word beginning with the letter b, and so on until the poem is finished. Kamata adapted the format to suit the particular needs of the EFL classroom by adding additional "rules" to the instructions, such as including a sentence fragment or a line longer than 100 words. This framework can be applied in poems, stories, or essays, and in this way, sentence variation and creative thinking can be applied across genres.

To create a mashup, writers take two different stories and combine them into one new, original story. Kamata provides students with a list of well-known titles from Eastern and Western literary traditions, and students choose one from each list. Stories that are likely to be familiar to Japanese students are folk tales like *Momotaro*, *Urashima Taro*, and *Kasa Jizo*, or modern series like *Detective Conan*, *Pokemon*, and *Anpanman*. These could be paired with European fairy tales made famous through Disney movies, such as *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *The Little Mermaid*. Similar to the abcedarian poem, the mashup assignment requires students to use both creative thinking and language skills to compose their stories and share them with classmates, either as written texts or oral presentations.

As teachers and writers know, polished drafts do not appear on the first try, and Kamata reminded participants that "writing is revising." Because of the importance of revision for experienced and novice writers alike, she offered practical suggestions for giving teacher feedback and eliciting peer feedback, such as giving comments, pointing out favorite words or phrases, and correcting grammar or spelling. Furthermore, teachers can ask specific questions to evoke students' feelings about a piece of writing. For instance, in her experience, students tend to underwrite, so by asking classmates to answer the question "What do you want to know more about?" students will be more likely to give meaningful feedback to each other.

During a year of online teaching and social distancing, it was a welcome opportunity not only to listen to descriptions of classroom activities but also to write something for fun and connect with other participants during the workshop portion of the session. First drafts of abcedarian poems and innovative ideas for mashups were shared by reading aloud or via the text chat function on Zoom. Indeed, session participants experienced the potential of creative writing activities to cultivate the "zest for life".

Concluding comments

Organising the online conference

This event went ahead online after 18 months of planning and several changes in the proposed schedule. Kyoto JALT contacted the LiLT SIG in May 2019 with the aim of bringing together JALT speakers for a joint event with another Kyoto group, Writers in Kyoto (WiK). After some discussions with the Kyoto JALT committee, a place, format, and focus for the event began to take shape, although available dates for the event moved from 2019 to 2020 and settled on April 2020. WiK decided not to continue as co-hosts. However, officers from Kyoto JALT were in continuous communication about the event until early 2020, when COVID-19 began to affect in-person chapter events. Kyoto JALT initially offered to reschedule for an online event, but a suitable date was not confirmed. Later in the year, in discussion with Kyoto JALT, the LiLT SIG decided to reschedule the event online and looked around for a chapter to host within the 2020 calendar year. Tokyo JALT was quick to reply to our inquiries and had a team ready to help organize the online event. We appreciate the support of Kyoto JALT in the planning stages and their continued correspondence through our change of plans. Kyoto JALT was also supportive of the change to Tokyo JALT as co-host.

Planned as an in-person event for April 2020, the move to the online format using Zoom for this CW event brought several benefits. Bringing together speakers from different parts of Japan has typically been one of the more challenging logistical aspects of event planning. Usually, it brings with it the expense of reimbursing travel for invited speakers. This event featured Suzanne Kamata in Shikoku, Iain Maloney in Gifu, Cristina Tat and Luke Draper in Kansai, and Atsushi Iida in Gunma. With online events in the future, speakers can also join from various parts of the country (or even from outside Japan, perhaps) without difficulty. The online format had some obvious advantages from the perspective of providing a more accessible experience for SIG JALT members. Speakers from smaller, countryside locations can join online events more easily, and JALT members from the more rural parts of the country have much to gain from this situation.

As well as logistics, the practical aspect of interaction during an online session seemed to suit the sessions' creative topics. Online events can discuss a theme in close-up, something which may not be possible in co-hosted conferences or symposia. The online format seemed to facilitate immediate feedback for speakers and communication between participants and allowed for diverse opinions to be exchanged. There was little of what Draper described as a common criticism of writing workshops, that is their "crucifying silences" (Draper, 2020, quoting Gross, 2010, p.52). For CW in particular, the online format creates the opportunity for simultaneous interaction and participant responses during workshop-style talks and Q&A sessions. In the online CW event, the audience could connect in real time with other participants by writing questions, comments, and opinions in the Zoom chat creating a shared experience. Thus for facilitators, keeping up with the discussion questions and allowing participants to ask their questions directly became more important than in regular in-person events.

Future directions for creative writing
There are many future directions for future SIG events or activities that may include working with CW in various contexts. In a lively discussion at the end, in addition to those described by the speakers, suggestions included using Japanese literature in translation, working with learners to publish or share their work, and CW for faculty development. Finally, perhaps CW teaching can help more fully acknowledge and appreciate Japan's literary and linguistic context, including the L1 language backgrounds of diverse language learners in Japan.

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