

Using six-word stories to trigger EFL learners' creative writing skills

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Abstract

There has been a growing volume of six-word stories and related literature available in recent decades. In only six words, the authors are able to tell amazing stories of various types, packed with strong emotions. Inspired by the succinct and thought-provoking language use of these stories, the author has used this valuable source of materials as prompts in promoting EFL learners' creativity and language development, both at high school and tertiary levels in a semi-structured case study in Vietnam. The article illustrates the different language activities that have been used with two groups of EFL students and their related products. Implications are introduced for their applications in similar educational contexts.

Keywords: EFL teaching and learning, creative writing, six-word stories, teaching methodology

Introduction

Creative writing is gaining in its popularity in various educational contexts, both in high schools and tertiary levels in different countries (Asri, 2015; Burksaitienè, 2014; Dali, Lau & Risk, 2015; McVey, 2008). The benefits of creative writing skill have been widely acknowledged by numerous authors. Specifically, characterized by originality and imagination, it enhances imagination, creativity and problem-solving skills (Susar-Kirmizi, 2005). In addition, as a vehicle for self-expression, creative writing not only can encourage individuals to express their thoughts freely but it also develops their ability to describe, to interpret and to think critically (Susar-Kirmizi, 2005). In this way, it can improve children's cognitive and communicative skills (Christopher, 1996, in Temizkana, 2011).

According to Maley (2012), characterized by some 'playfulness' in language use, creative writing helps the learners to take risks with language, resulting in natural language development, motivation enhancement and autonomy in language learning. It is also considered to enrich learners' story

telling skills, emotional maturity and personal development (Bigalk, 2014; Dali, Lau & Risk, 2015).

Creative writing in EFL classroom

As stated by Težak (2015), creative writing is a skill, often more promoted among native speakers of English, rather than EFL learners and Maley (2012) also comments that non-native learners of English often lack the confidence to write interesting materials by themselves. In line with this, the author's observation is that in Vietnam, creative writing is not properly nurtured in EFL environments. In this country, EFL writing often emphasizes facts, rather than imagination and creativity. A quick glance at the writing tasks in English books for high school learners in Grade 10 and 11 can reveal this. In these textbooks, apart from writing letters for different purposes, which is the main focus of EFL writing in these grades, other writing tasks are specifically as follows:

- + *Write a one paragraph profile of Trinh Cong Son or some artist of your own (information provided)* (English for grade 10 Advanced, page 158).
- + *Write a paragraph about the movie Rain Man. (background information, story summary and significance of the movie provided)* (English for grade 10 Advanced, page 177).
- + *Write an announcement of a sporting event or an activity in your school* (English for grade 10 Advanced, page 187).
- + *Write a letter to tell your friend the most embarrassing experience of yours in the same way (model given)* (English for grade 11 Advanced, page 30)
- + *You are going to celebrate your birthday. Write a letter of invitation. State the event, place, time and special activities if available* (English for grade 11 Advanced, page 42).
- + *Write a description for the following tables about deforestation in Southeast Asia between 1990 and 2005. (Model provided)* (English for grade 11 Advanced, page 135)

Considering the benefits that creative writing can bring about to the learners, the author would like to argue for the addition of creative writing as a component in EFL teaching so as to enhance the learners' creativity, their motivation and learning experience enrichment.

Six-word stories

As indicated in some websites, the first six-word story "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." is believed to be written by Ernest Hemingway in

1920s. In 2006, SMITH Magazine introduced the Six-Word Memoirs project by asking the readers to send in life stories within six words. Since then, six-word stories have become globally popular. With only six words, the authors are able to tell inspiring and highly thought provoking stories. The widespread appearance of six word stories is not only witnessed in the various websites with the participation of numerous contributors, both professional and non-professional, but their popularity is also well documented in books with activities to be used (Fershleiser & Smith, 2008; Smith & Fershleiser, 2009) are just a few examples.

In education, six-word stories have been used in classrooms, mainly for primary English-native speaker learners. In these contexts, the teachers asked their learners, especially primary school ones, to write their memoirs in six words (Barber, 2015; O'Dell, 2016; Rich, 2014). Barber (2015) also suggests other writing activities related to the use of six words stories, for example, to use six words to “summarize a lesson, describe a character, state a problem, pose a question or write a personal goal.”

However, there seems to be no literature about the use of six-word stories in teaching EFL learners, especially in Vietnam. Inspired by the succinct and thought-provoking language use of these stories, the author has been encouraged to use these stories as prompts in promoting her learners to write creatively. This article is an attempt to share her experiences in using six-word stories with EFL learners, both at high school and university levels, in Vietnam.

Research Procedure

This case study was informal and semi-structured, starting with the thought of trying out a few six-word stories with a group of participants to explore their response to the stories and further activities were designed accordingly. After the learners' initial response seemed promising, the activities were replicated and expanded with the second group of participants. Therefore, the whole case study also represents teacher's / researcher's learning process in using these stories in the classroom.

There were two groups of participants. The first one was a group of 20 high school students of both males and females, aged 15 to 17, who had learnt English at school from four to six years. Their English was at pre-intermediate level. At the time of the case study, they had been on a private IELTS course which met three times a week for three months with the researcher.

The case study with this was conducted in three sessions from 15 to 30 minutes each within one week in December 2017. The main activity

(Activity 1) with this group was for them to write short stories of at least 100 words based on a six-word story provided as a prompt. This was done as a warmer in their routine classes.

Two months later, the same case study was repeated with a class of 40 English major university seniors in their early 20s when they were doing a short American literature course with the researcher. In addition to the activity used with the first group of participants, this group was also asked to write their memoirs in six words (Activity 2).

Implementation and discussion

Activity 1: Expanded stories based on six-word prompts

In order to help the participants in producing creative stories, three main steps of familiarization, guidance, and production were conducted specifically as follows.

Stage 1: Familiarization

In this stage, the participants were first introduced to a number of six-word stories taken from different websites. For example,

- *For sale: baby shoes, never worn.*
- *Man cried, holding his dog's leash.*
- *Strangers. Friends. Best friends. Lovers. Strangers.*
- *Rain. Two strangers. One umbrella. Love.*
- *Did your wish ever come true?*
- *The only mourner. Her pet cat.*

Stage 2: Guidance

To make sure that the participants understood the contents of the stories, some comprehension questions were posed to help them in the process. The participants then worked in pairs to share their understanding. Different interpretations were accepted as long as they made sense. Following was a typical example. The participants were provided with the story, "Wolf! Where? Wolf! Where? Wolf! Wolf!"

Then, the participants were provided with guided questions to interpret the contents of the story with their peers. These questions also functions as a comprehension set of scaffolding for the participants to map the main ideas and identify different elements of the story. The questions are as follows:

1. How many people could there be in this interaction?
2. Where were these people?

3. What could they have seen?
4. Who saw it first?
5. What did that person's first reaction?
6. How did other people respond to it?
7. What happened next?
8. What happened in the end?

After that, the pairs shared their ideas with the whole members of the class who might ask them further questions about their interpretations. In some later stories, it was the participants who raised the questions about the stories they read for the class. The participants, then, discussed questions related to the following six-word stories that were taken from various websites:

- *"I'm just tired." That's my excuse.*
- *I wish it were a nightmare.*
- *Crowd standing. Anxious groom. Empty doorway.*
- *Disputes between nations. Sorrow among families.*
- *You'll always be a question mark.*

The discussion of the stories aims to familiarize learners with the construction of six-word stories in relation to main ideas, setting, characters, and plots.

Stage 3: Production

After the participants discuss the six-word stories provided, the participants were asked to choose one six-word story that they would like to work on. They were, then, assigned to write at least a 100-word story. The participants were allowed to put these six words that they chose anywhere in the story. This means that these six words could appear at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of the story. These words could stand together or separately in sensible groups.

Before they wrote their stories, the researcher also briefly explained the typical features in writing a story, i.e. the context, characters, plot, sequence of actions and events, feelings, in addition to the use of dialogues and past tenses.

Activity 2: Six-word memoirs

Stage 1: Familiarization

For a start, examples about life memoirs were provided for the participants for them to have some ideas of what these memoirs could be like. The main aim of this stage is to introduce the basic elements and

characteristics of memoirs. In this activity, the followings prompts were used:

- *Test tomorrow. Anxiety tonight. Relief Friday.*
- *Played with the dog. Dog scratched eye.*
- *Change what you are complaining about.*
- *Sounded much better in my head.*

Stage 2: Guidance

At this stage, the participants were guided with some questions in understanding the six-word memoirs. These questions also can function as scaffolding to expand the six-word memoirs. They can be used for brainstorming activities. The participants discussed the questions before they were assigned to produce their own memoirs or a response to the given story in six words. The questions are as follows:

Prompt: *Introduced myself to mother again today.*

1. sad/happy/story?
2. how many people/ in/story?
3. relationship/between/them?
4. who/introduce? Normal?
5. why/introduce/again?
6. mother's age?
7. child's feelings?
8. this story/ common/real life?
9. if/happened/how/you/would feel?
10. story /teach/you?

Since these participants were doing a literature course with the researcher, she introduced a poem with a similar theme written by a Vietnamese famous poet, as shown in excerpt 1. The use of this poem aims to trigger the participants' emotions and inspiration to produce their own response to the story or the poem.

Stage 3: Production

In this stage, the participants were given the choice of writing about one of the following tasks.

1. Write six words about how the child felt.
2. Write six words about a memorable experience you've had with your mother/father.
3. Write a conversation between the mother and her child.
4. Write a six-word memoir about your life.
5. Write a story of at least 100 words, based on those six words.

Excerpt 1
The prompt and its English translation

<p>Mẹ ta trả nhớ về không Đỗ Trung Quân</p> <p>ngày xưa chào mẹ, ta đi mẹ ta thì khóc , ta đi thì cười mười năm rồi lại thêm mười ta về thì khóc, mẹ cười lạ không ông ai thế ? Tôi chào ông mẹ ta trí nhớ về mệnh mông rồi ông có gặp thằng con tôi hao hao... tôi nhớ... nó ...người ...như ông. mẹ ta trả nhớ về không trả trăm năm lại bụi hồng... rồi.. đi...</p>	<p>My Mom Has Given Up Her Memory Đỗ Trung Quân</p> <p>Years ago, I bid my Mom farewell. I smiled while she was in tears. Ten years, then another ten. When I returned: She smiled while I was in tears.</p> <p>“Good morning! Who are you, sir?” Her memory seemed to have gone. “Have you met my dear child, sir? He looks somewhat ... like you as far as I can remember.”</p> <p>My dear Mom’s left her memory and her lifelong past at a rosebush, ready for a departure.</p>
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From prompts to longer texts

The first group of the participants were assigned to expand stories based on the six-word prompts. The results showed that all the participants were able to produce and expand the stories. All the stories manifested their independent and creative thinking though some were linguistically weaker than the others. The six-word story given was, “*I awoke. The door was open.*” which was taken from one of the websites and the learners were asked to write a story of at least 100 words, using these six words anywhere in their stories.

In a previous session, the participants had already discussed the contents of the story in pairs, using the guided questions.

1. What kind of story could this story be (horror/romantic/detective/adventure)?
2. How did the person feel?
3. What had happened?
4. What happened next?

As a result, all the 20 participants handed in their stories with diverse contents and categories. They varied from a happy story, a fun story, a surprise story, to a detective story, a horror story, or a mystery story. Interestingly, they shared one common factor of some suspense or a twist,

which made their stories more interesting to read. A sample of their writings is presented in Appendix A.

The second group of participants was assigned to choose one of the four following options:

1. Write 6 words about how the child felt.
2. Write a story of at least 100 words, based on those six words.
3. Write 6 words about a memorable experience you've had with your mother/father.
4. Write a 6-word memoir.

Some (17/40) selected the first option and some (22/40) chose the fourth option. One did not hand in the writing. The participants were able to produce their own chosen text that fulfilled the characteristics of the text chosen. All the products were typed and shown in a power-point presentation to share with the whole class. A sample of their productions is provided in Appendix B.

A significant benefit gained from the introduction of six-word stories was that the participants were exposed to a considerable number of literary texts which were generally simple linguistically but highly thought-provoking cognitively. This was valuable to language teaching and learning considering the limited exposure to the authentic literary texts that Vietnamese learners usually had.

Another success was that in the stories created by the participants, features that characterize stories like plot, context, sequence of events, feelings and even dialogues were present. This showed that the participants were aware of these typical elements in constructing their stories. Linguistically, they had manifested a richer range of vocabulary and structures to convey the contents to the readers despite some mistakes in language use, especially in tenses. This was a vivid illustration of individual participants' ability in the meaningful and flexible use of language for communicating purposes that went beyond the constraints of school tasks that were often observed.

A further achievement was the participants' creative writing displayed in their stories informed the readers of these participants' creative thinking and imagination. The plots of their stories were valuable even when they were not innovative or were simply mingled evidence of their living or learning experiences through the mass media that they were exposed to. This was because it provided the teachers with some insight into their learners' cognitive development and maturity for more suitable teaching.

As observed, the tasks were valuable because they gave the participants an opportunity to think out of the box, to be free in their imagination, resulting in their risks-taking attitude in making up stories and using the language to creative make their own products. These complete

products also gave them joy, confidence and pride in their ability in creating “fun” products to share with their peers. In this way, classroom learning was no longer limited to textbook lessons but connected to the outside world, thus increasing the participants’ motivation in language learning.

Closing Remarks

As shown, the six-word stories seemed to work effectively in developing the learners’ creative thinking and language communication, as well as other favourable affective factors for language learning. As prompts, these six-word stories are generally simple linguistically so they do not take much time in class for comprehension. Also, the tasks could be flexibly conducted both in class and at home. This was also an advantage for its application in different EFL contexts.

These strengths coincide with Bigalk’s opinion that creative writing creates a space for creative learners to develop (2014) and Maley’s recommendation that we need to establish a relaxing and non-judgmental environment for the learners to feel free from fear of making mistakes and to enjoy their learning (2012). In this way, creative assignments can enrich any course (Dali, Lau and Risk, 2015) and as such, the tasks introduced in this article can be useful in similar EFL learning.

There are a few recommendations which can be useful to the teachers. First, the choice of inspiring six-word stories and the accompanied activities should be based on the learners’ maturity and interests as well as the time allotment to maximise the effectiveness. Second, the learners’ products are valuable, irrespective of their linguistic and content quality, because these products can provide some insights into the learners’ linguistic and cognitive ability. Therefore, it is considered important that the learners’ self-esteem and creativity be encouraged. It is hoped that this article is beneficial in contributing to some tasks that can foster various abilities and skills in our language learners.

The author

Phuong Le has done her post-graduate education in TESOL and Applied Linguistics in Australia, US and UK. She has been an EFL teacher and teacher educator for nearly 40 years in various teaching contexts. She has also been working as a translator and an IELTS trainer for many years. She has presented and published extensively both nationally and internationally on various EFL issues. She is currently teaching American literature at Phu Yen University, Vietnam and her professional interests include learners’

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Resources

Prompts for *Introduced myself to mother again today* is retrieved from <https://imgur.com/gallery/d1XjS>

Prompts for six-word stories is generated from https://www.google.com/search?q=six+word+story+wolf&client=firefox-b-ab&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi5kebnnNfbAhUHfn0KHb-ZBTgQ_AUICigB&biw=1366&bih=654

Appendix A

Samples of students' expanded stories based on six-word prompts

Today, I will tell you a story of me live in a quiet house in the middle of the forest.

A long time ago, I was still a little boy. I was very scare of the dark. At night, I was slept on the chair when I was watching TV. I remember that I lock the door when I starting to go to the living room to watched TV. But when **I awoke**, I saw **the door was open**. That time I was really scared and I was starting to think, my house is in the middle of the forest and no one live near me. I heard the TV someone said something and I went close to the TV and the TV said: "there is a killer escape from the prison and the killer run into the forest."

Nguyen Chau Tan Cuong (Year 9)

My friend, Thomas, is a famous detective in the local area and I am his apprentice. I have experienced many interesting cases.

One day, as usually, **I awoke** quite late. I heard many noises downstairs. I went down and saw Thomas having a big argument with a strange man. They talked loudly and the man looked worried. Then he left.

I asked Thomas what was happening and he asked me to go with him. I got into his car and we went to a villa. There was a lot of police. Then we came into a living room. **I opened the door**. In front of my eyes was a dead body of a woman. It was extremely terrible. Then I looked at my friend. He was calm and he told me that he knew what was happening. I was so surprised.

After a whole day at the villa, my friend finally found a suspect. He told me: Did you remember the man whom we met this morning? I think he is the person that killed his wife.

Anh Khoa (Year 10)

It has been a long time since Judy met someone that she love and truly care about. When she was 18, one morning when **she awoke, the door was open** and her Mom went away. Her father married another woman after that. Ever since, she had to loved by herself and she force herself not to trust anyone every again.

It was on Christmas. The weather was cold and everyone around seems to have somebody to love and looks very happy. At that moment, she wished God sent someone for her to carry her sorrows away. Suddenly, she saw a puppy was left on the street. Just like her, he felt lonely. She took him to her apartment, fed him, cleaned him and decided to take good care for

him. That puppy was so cheerful and full of energy. He always play with Judy and sooth all her anxiety. She soon realised that in this life there are still a lot of nice things and she learnt that when you have a bad past, it does not mean that it can stop you from having a bright future.

Bui Phuong Thao (Year 11)

Last Christmas, when my family went to bed, I still waited for my present from Santa Clause so I can't sleep until the clock was 2a.m. But something was happened. There was a sound. "Someone crying", I think. Then I awoke. The door was open. I remembered that I closed it when I went to my room. Then I saw a shadow sat on the chair. I said, "Why don't you sleep? I will catch you and bring you to hell." I ran out of my bed, tried to escape from him. But he was so fast, he got my hand and throw me to the ground. He opened the hell's door and forced me to went into it.

I saw a silver ring who my grandpa gave me to prevent from the evil so I touch into the evil's face and his face was burned. After that, he was disappeared.

I woke up and realized that I had a nightmare. I never sleep very late at night again.

Nguyen Tien Khanh (Year 12)

Appendix 2

Samples of students' six-word memoirs and verse memoirs

To my mother, I'm a stranger (by Le Thi Ai Nhi)

My mother's questions are my pain (Pham thi Hong Nhien)

Mother smiled. She asked. I cried (Luong thi Trong Thi)

When I was a baby, you want me to say, "Mummy"

When you are old, I want you to say my name.

(by Duong Nguyen Thuc Quynh)

If one day

by Phạm Hồng Hạnh

If one day, you don't remember me.

Don't worry, I'll be your future.

If one day, you don't remember me.

Don't worry, I will take care of you.

Don't worry, don't worry.

I will do everything for you

With all my heart and mind