

EFL students as creative writers

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Abstract

This article aims to share the author's mini-action research in using some creative writing activities with Vietnamese high school students to examine how creative these EFL students could be in their writing of English and how useful creative writing can be to them. Three teaching activities were tried out as warmers with two groups of students in three different English sessions within two weeks. The outcome showed that these high school students were able to write creatively and their products could contribute to consolidating the benefits of creative activities in enhancing students' mental and emotional development as advocated in various EFL contexts (Avramenko et al., 2018; Maloney, 2019; Manara, 2015; Pawliczak, 2015; Rippey, 2014; Şenel, 2018).

Keywords: creative writing, EFL high school students, warmer activities

Creative Writing in EFL classroom

Literature review of creative writing has highlighted its growing popularity to school and university students in various countries (Asri, 2015; Burksaitienė, 2014; Dali et al., 2015). It serves as a useful vehicle for students to reflect on their inner life (Knoeller, 2003) and to enhance their imagination, creativity, as well as their problem solving (Avramenko et al., 2018), and critical thinking skills (Susar-Kirmizi, 2005). According to Maley (2012), creative writing also helps students to take risks with language, resulting in their natural language development and enhanced motivation in language learning.

Despite these benefits, creative writing has not been adequately promoted among EFL learners (Maley, 2012; Težak, 2015) and examination of English school textbooks in Vietnam also consolidates this observation for EFL teaching (Phuong Le, 2018). In this context, as an EFL teacher/researcher, the author has some positive experience in enabling Vietnamese EFL students to write poems (Phuong thi, 2015; Anh Le, 2014; 2012) and to develop stories based on prompted six-word stories (Phuong Le, 2018). This paper reports a further attempt by the author in consolidating the values of various creative writing activities with EFL school students in Vietnam.

This article aims to introduce EFL high school students' creative writings to illustrate the benefits of creative writing activities in enhancing students' mental and emotional development as advocated in various EFL contexts (Maloney, 2019; Pawliczak, 2015; Rippey, 2014; Şenel, 2018). In our experience, apart from the language development, these activities have encouraged these teenagers not only to look at things from different angles to develop better awareness about the world around but also to promote their imagination and creativity for personal and cognitive growth. The students involved in these activities were mostly in grades 10 to 12 forming different mixed-ability groups who were following a course to prepare themselves for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exams. At the time of these writing tasks, they had been on the course from one to four months. For each task, students had 15 minutes to complete and their finished products were typed up by the teacher to share them with the whole class in a subsequent session. The versions presented in this article are the original ones.

The mini-project

Participants and context

Participants involved in this mini project were 38 teenage students (grades 10 to 12) who had learnt English in their schools since grade 6 in a small town in Vietnam. At the time of this project, they were taking a private course conducted by the researcher to prepare them for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exams which consisted of four language skills. They were expected to get an IELTS score of 5.5 to 6.5 to be eligible for some tertiary education or overseas studies after a year.

This student population came from two groups: a) Group A consisted of 20 participants who, at the time of the project, had been on the IELTS course for one month, with three weekly sessions of 1.5 hours each and their language was generally at pre-intermediate level. Meanwhile, Group B had 18 participants who had been on a similar course for four months and their language was mostly at the pre-intermediate level, with an exception of intermediate level for some. The choice of these students for this mini-project was for convenience only and their participation was voluntary.

It is worth mentioning that as a routine, each session during this IELTS course often started with a 5 to 10- minute warmer when the students listened to a song, read a story, or watched a video clip about various issues mainly to relax, with some additional development of their language skills.

The creative writing activities used for this project was implemented in place of the time used for these routine warmers.

Activity selection

The choice of the following creative writing activities was based on three main criteria. First, they should be short (within 15 minutes) so that they did not take much time from the main session which aimed at academic English as required by the IELTS tests. Second, the tasks should be within the students' language and cognitive levels so that the participants could manifest their language and cognitive abilities without requiring too much of their effort. Third, the tasks should be interesting and thought-provoking enough to ignite the participants' creativity. The three following activities were believed to meet these requirements. Activity 1 was adopted for Group A while Activities 2 and 3 were for Group B. Activity 3 was actually a followed-up activity for a story that Group B had read as a warmer activity previously in class.

Activity 1: Imagine you were invisible for a day¹

- What would you do if you were invisible for a day?
- Would you like the experience?
- Would you be happy to return to normal later?

Activity 2: Imagine that you are an animal in the zoo.²

- What type of animal are you?
- How do you feel about being caged?
- How do you feel about people that visit and watch you?

Activity 3: Story continuation³

- A. In the role of Jimmy (the police officer) or Bob (the prisoner), write a letter of about 100 words to Bob or Jimmy.
- B. Write about 100 words to continue the story.

Activity implementation

Activity 1 was conducted as a routine warmer in class with Group A. The participants needed no further explanation to do the task and all of them completed the task within 15 minutes and their products were collected. In the same week, Activity 2 was carried out with Group B in a similar mode. With this group, the teacher suggested that they used their imagination and

¹ adapted from <https://thinkwritten.com/writing-prompts-for-kids>

² adapted from various blogs on the Internet

³ adapted from enotes.homework-help.com

creativity as much as possible and the participants had no questions about the requirements of the task. One week after the implementation of Activity 2, Group B did Activity 3 in a similar fashion, except that it was based on a story the participants had read as a warmer in a previous session. Again, the participants completed the task without any queries.

Findings and Discussion

A collection of 20 stories from Activity 1 was produced by Group A and 36 writings came from Group B for Activities 2 and 3. The products from each task were put in the power-point form and shared with the related group in a subsequent session. Personal observations showed that the participants enjoyed reading these products. Their appreciation was manifested in their claps of hands after finishing each story.

Students as creative writers

As observed, despite the differences in length and language accuracy, all the products have displayed the participants' creativity, which is presented in the following section. The samples shown in this article are in their original forms.

Viewing the world from a different perspective (Activity 1)

Sample 1 (Quynh Chi, Grade 11)

One day I had a nightmare. I had been turned into a baboon. One person came and took me into the cage. Then that people brought me to the zoo, I was very angry about being caged but I can't talk. My sound is very strange. Suddenly, many children and their families came in front of my cage. They threw bananas and apples into my cage. One of them touched my head and it hurted me. I felt uncomfortable when the children touched me and their parents told them that I was very dirty so they don't touch me. I hate that someone touch me but now I can't do anything. If I had a resistance, the manager will hitted me. Luckily, my mom waked me up and I could escape that nightmare. I hope that I can find a way to help animals in the zoo. I wish animals could talk for themselves.

Sample 2 (Tran Lam Diem Quynh, Grade 10)

Two nights ago, I dreamed I had been turned into an animal in Amazon forest. In my dream, I was a baby monkey which was eating apples on the top of the tree and was breathing the fresh air of Amazon. I was different which other monkey because I was born a week ago and my fur was white. I saw a group of man went to the forest by big cars. They wore guns, boots with some hats made by skin of goats. I had seen many groups like that before, so I didn't care and still eating my apple. Just a moment, I saw they cut some big trees, killed some animals. I scared so I went escape. That night, when I was sleeping, I felt so hot. Like something burned my furs, my eyes, my skins. Then I knew the Amazon was burning. I climbed, climbed as high as I can, climbed to the top of big tree and went to escape. I saw from the tree, many kinds of animals were killed by the fire. They ran like me but they didn't lucky like me. After that night, I lost my monkey family. They died all. I got up, understood and felt how terrible is that.

According to the collected products, whether the animals were caged (sample 1) or in the wild (sample 2), they were all victims of human actions. As reflected in sample 1, the poor baboon was indignant for being caught and caged in the zoo, especially when they were unable to express its feelings and thoughts in human language. As a target of human nosiness, the baboon had to suffer human thoughtless actions, such as throwing bananas and apples or touching its head. However, being in a more disadvantaged situation, the miserable animal had to accept the plight or they would have received further punishment.

Further examples in the Appendix exemplify the frustration and suffering experienced by caged animals who were deprived of the freedom which was essential to their survival. Their pains and sorrows were also brutally ignored by those humans who in the name of animal lovers actually satisfied their own curiosity and fun only.

Written from the perspective of a newly born monkey in an Amazon fire, Sample 2 was a sharp denouncement of human crimes against wild animals. With '*guns, boots with some hats made by skin of goats*', heartless people ravaged the forest and caused forest fires which destroyed the animals' peaceful habitat, sending the helpless animals into a desperate situation. Horror pervaded the forest and all the animals, including the

innocent baby monkey, were running for their lives in intense fear and despair. Miserably, the monstrous fire had taken away the right to live of many animals. Sarcastically, the baby monkey survived; however, its lonely survival was bitter and heart-broken because its home had been destroyed, its family and fellow creatures had been massacred.

As can be seen, the task expects the participants, in their roles of animals, to show their observations and feelings about the ways humans treated animals. The result is that the participants have displayed sharp observations about people's cruel actions, causing serious plights and the sufferings to their victims. The fear, the hatred, and the agitation of the weaker creatures being caught and caged have been vividly described, showing the writers' deep understanding, sympathy, and empathy for the wild animals, both in the zoo and in the wild. As expressed in Pawliczak (2015), 'Creative writing opens your mind to different things; you can look at the world in a way you haven't looked before' and the participants in our case also had a similar experience. Through their stories (both in the samples and in the Appendix), by switching into the role of the wild animals, these participants have gained new understanding of human actions from a completely different perspective. In this way, creative writing has encouraged these teenagers not only to look at things from different angles but also to develop better awareness about the world around to have adequate actions in protecting it.

Expressing their imagination (Activity 2)

Sample 3 (Phi Long, Grade 9)

If I was invisible, I will have a free trip to USA. I will go to the White House and have a trip around there. I will visit the Ball Room where Donald Trump have the preference and take some photos. After that, I will go to Nevada to visit Area 51, in that place I may meet the aliens or the UFOs, which interest me for a long time. Then I will go to the Hollywood studio, where I can visit some movie stars, maybe I will spend about an hour to look around the theaters to see some new movies there. I have heard that there are a lot of famous foods in USA and I would like to try a couple of them at the restaurant. After lunch, I will visit Empire State Building and Time Square for a beautiful look when going to these attractive spots, especially is Time Square. After that, I will give my last amount of time watching Golden Gate Warrior to watch Stephen Curry, my idol playing basketball. When

everything is finish, I will have a flight to come back home. It is good to travel to the USA but I realised that I have more things to do so I will be normal so that my parents know where I have gone and I will tell them about my exciting trip.

Sample 4 (Mai Anh Tu, Grade 11)

If I were invisible, in the beginning I would feel fear and ask myself why I become invisible and how is become visible again. I worry that my family worries because of my disappearance. I would do some little experiments to verify that light really bends when it passes through my body and find a way to become normal. By somehow, I know I will get rid of this state after one day. I would think I receive a God's blessing and try finding a way how to switch from invisibility to visibility, and vice versa. Maybe I have a supernatural ability, an invisibility skill. After that, I try to see invisible things like ghosts, angels, souls, spirits, devils and so on. If I can see them, I could explain some unscientific phenomena like ghost stories and my findings will probably shock the world.

In sample 3, the author, a grade nine student, has taken the readers into the world of his imagination and dream in which he has displayed his fascinating ambitions. His fully-packed day allowed him to visit various places of interest in the US, to watch films, to eat new food, to meet his favourite celebrities, and even to see aliens, as well as UFOs. With these wishes, he has revealed to the readers the 'dreaming child' inside himself. Thus, creative writing seems to have lent him the magic wings to take him across space and time to fulfill his curiosity and aspiration. In this way, he appeared to be immersed in his imagination and enjoyment, in a world of wonder that he had created for himself.

The wonderland of creativity has enabled the writer of sample 4 to voice his strong interest in the scientific world with experiments in physics '*to verify that light really bends when it passes through my body.*' He has allowed us to sneak into his dream world where he aimed to find out how to possess a supernatural capacity of switching '*from invisibility to visibility, and vice versa*'. He also aspired to explore the spiritual world of '*ghosts, angels, souls, spirits, devils*', which has remained a mystery for numerous generations of scientists. Thus, this task has offered this writer, a teenager with an inquiring mind, an opportunity to travel into the land of fantasy to discover many inexplicable phenomena to human beings. As shown in the

writing collection, there seemed to be no limit to these students' imagination and dreams.

In short, this activity has given the participants an opportunity not only to express their dreams, their imagination, and creativity but also their personalities as teenagers who liked to discover new things or enjoyed playing childish pranks on other people (Appendix). Each participant has displayed various interesting aspects about themselves through their writings, enabling the teacher not to regard them simply as language learners with weaknesses, but more as interesting individuals for further exploration.

Fostering their problem-solving and creative thinking skills

Task 3 was done as a follow-up activity after the group had read a simpler version of O. Henry's short story "After Twenty Years" in a previous session. In other words, each participant was expected to play the role of Bob, an imprisoned criminal, to write a letter to his once friend (Jimmy), now a cop, who had ordered to capture him. Another choice was to write a letter from Jimmy, the cop, to Bob, an imprisoned criminal. Or, the participant could choose to write an expansion for this story in any way s/he liked. In a way, the participants were expected to show their problem-solving skills in dealing with the relationship between these two characters in O' Henry's story.

Sample 5: Letter from Bob (Pham Lam Quoc Dung, Grade 10)

Dear Jimmy,

How are you? It has been a long time since the last time I wrote you a letter, but not just any letters, this is a letter from the prison. I remember the day I met you again after 20 years separated or I thought that was you. If I didn't have that conversation that day, I would be somewhere continuing my crime and no sooner or later, I would get arrested or get shot in the middle of nowhere. If I didn't keep the promise that day, I wouldn't have a chance to change my life. So, thank you Jimmy for being a good cop and a good friend as well.

Your friend,

Bob

Sample 6: Letter from Jimmy (Nguyen Tran Hong Phuc, Grade 10)

Dear Bob,

It has been two months since the night you were arrested. How are you, Bob? I hope you will feel comfortable with the new life in prison and please do not angry with me when I depend another cop went to that restaurant to arrest you. I do that because I want you change your life to be a good person. I think when you stay in prison, you will have more time to think about your life and I really want after leaving there you will have a better life. I promise I will always beside you when you need and I can give you a new job after leaving there. With a beautiful friendship, you can overcome the prison day and after some year more me and you meet again without danger.

Talk another time.

Jimmy

Sample 7: Story continuation (Nguyen Ngoc Truong Duy, Grade 10).

Two months later, Bob was sent back to the West after New York court judging that he would be executed within the next five months. During that 5 months, Bob was detained in L.A. Prison, also Bob and Jimmy sent a lot of letters to each other. In Jimmy's last letter, he said that he would come to L.A. to see Bob again for the last time in his life, Bob was very happy, both of them was waiting for that day to come. But three weeks before Bob was executed, Jimmy was sent to the South by the government to help the South's police fight against Mexico's mafia and the campaign was successful but Jimmy sacrificed his life to protect his team mates. After Bob knew about his friend's death, he was depressed and sad. He wrote his last letter and sent it to Jimmy's family, told them to put the letter into Jimmy's coffin as Bob's last wish, and in Bob's last letter, he said, "At least, I can meet you again in heaven, my mate." Two weeks later, Bob was executed in L.A. Prison.

In sample 5, Bob, a prisoner, showed no resentment to his friend Jim, a police officer who had ordered another policeman to take him to jail. Instead, Bob expressed his gratitude to Jim whose action had led Bob to the

right path of life *'If I didn't have that conversation that day, I would be somewhere continuing my crime'* and *'I wouldn't have a chance to change my life'*. Via Bob's attitude, the participant has chosen to expose the good nature inside Bob, who realised his wrongdoing and wanted to maintain a good friendship with Jimmy. In doing this, the participant has successfully identified the good part of a person, even in a criminal like Bob. Similarly, in sample 6, Jim, the cop, also expected Bob not to criticise him but to understand him for his action. He also expressed his dedicated care to Bob.

Instead of writing letters, some participants chose to develop the story of O' Henry further. Their story endings have strongly reflected their creative thinking and creative writing skills. Sample 7 is such an example. The participant-author has made his story ending highly moving and fascinating. Bob had a death sentence and during the last few months of his time, he and Jim wrote to each other often. Jim also promised to visit him the last time before Bob's death but due to an important mission for his work, he died in action and could not see Bob. Learning about this tragic news, Bob wrote a letter to be put in Jim's coffin. It said, *"At least, I can meet you again in heaven, my mate"* and soon after that, Bob was executed by law.

For task 3, prompted by O' Henry's story, the products have suggested these teenagers' novel solutions for the conflicts between friendship and their responsibility to society. The letters have shown that these young people's maturity and warm hearts in appreciating the friendship and fulfilling a social duty. It is their solutions that have exposed the goodness inside these teenagers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, for this group of students who were intended to aim at the IELTS exams, these creative writing activities have actually offered them fun and an outlet to express themselves, as well as making them more creative and interesting language learners. These benefits perhaps might not have limited to the specific requirements of IELTS course. They actually have exerted bigger impacts on these participants as not only language learners but also as interesting teenagers. Apart from language development, creative writing has enabled these high school students not only to look at things from different angles and develop better awareness about the world around but also to promote their imagination and creativity for personal and cognitive growth. Indeed, these activities have served as springboards for teenage students to expose their inner lives, with great imagination and creativity, good awareness, and thinking skills about various issues in life.

Also, suitable tasks have given these students space to explore issues from different perspectives to have adequate attitudes and to make decisions in life. Thus, all these skills can assist them in adapting to new changes in modern society and getting ready for lifelong learning.

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The author

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Appendix A

Students writing samples

1. *Last night, I had a dream that I, being caged in a zoo and I had been turned into a panther. I couldn't believe that I had been turned into an animal. I was shock that aggressively started to hit the cage's door in order to escape out of the zoo. It seemed that my action had scared those people around. After a few hours, a man came and open the cage, he was trying to stun me with his electric gun but somehow I managed to escape, I ran into the city but only a few moments later, I got surrounded by the police. At that time, I woke up. (Minh Khoi)*
2. *I had a magical dream 2 days ago. I dreamed I turned into a rhino which was the kind being extincted in the real world. However, I lost my hinos and it was bleeding. People tried taking me in the zoo and they had plan which helped me have a new life. They caged me into a little garden and they fed me a lot of nutrian foods. Actually, I didn't understood why they took my hinos? And why they bring me into the zoo just in order to people visit and take photos with me? They said they loved us, they saved us but why they drank medicines made by blood as well as my hinos? I felt very angry and disappointed. I had to look for the way to escape this place. (Kim, Grade 9).*
3. *The first thing I want to do when I become invisible is that I want to prank on other people. I would go around the school, go into every class and start to turn on the lights on and off rapidly, make something in the class float and put some signs on the board to scare the teachers and the students so that the whole school can have a free break day. But the problem comes right after that, while running out of class, some students may bump into me and if I'm unlucky, people can even step on me without realizing it. And when I try to cross the road where there is no traffic sign, a very high percentage that I will cause an accident. And if my parents don't know where I am, they will go and look for me and can even call the cops so I am sure that I don't enjoy that experience. And I would definitely be glad to be back to normal the next day. (Minh Khoi, Grade 10)*

4. *Dear Bob,*

It has been one month since we met each other again after 20 years. How are you? Maybe my action that night made you angry and disappointed but I did not have any other choice.

You were the one whom Chicago cops tried to catch and I was very disappointed when I knew that. However, I was thankful to you because you still kept our promise despite the danger you could get when you came to the meeting place. I felt lucky that I have a friend like you so I did not want to catch you by myself. I hope that you could understand for me.

Wish you have no difficulty in prison and when you leave there, you can become a better person. And if we can, we will meet again after next twenty years at the restaurant. Is it OK? Please do not be sad because I always remember and love you.

*Your best friend,
Jimmy*

(Nguyen Hoai Ngan, Grade 10)

5. *After reading the letter, Bob had shocked for a while. Then he cried. He felt bad about what he did and he felt ashamed with his best friend. They promised to see each other again after Bob was released. Five years later, Bob was free and they met each other. At the same place, Bob went into the restaurant and he saw a cop sitting on a chair next to the window. He knew that was Jimmy but he didn't go and talk to him. He left the restaurant quietly and returned to California to start his new life.*
(Duy Lan, Grade 10)