Creative writing for language learners (and teachers)

Submitted by Alan Maley on 16 December, 2009 - 15:41

Creative writing normally refers to the production of texts which have an aesthetic rather than a purely informative, instrumental or pragmatic purpose. Most often, such texts take the form of poems or stories, though they are not confined to these genres. (Letters, journal entries, blogs, essays, travelogues, etc. can also be more or less creative.) In fact, the line between creative writing (CW) and expository writing (ER) is not carved in stone. In general, however CW texts draw more heavily on intuition, close observation, imagination, and personal memories than ER texts.

One of the chief distinguishing characteristics of CW texts is a playful engagement with language, stretching and testing its rules to the limit in a guilt-free atmosphere, where risk is encouraged. Such writing combines cognitive with affective modes of thinking. As the poet, R.S. Thomas once wrote, 'Poetry is that which arrives at the intellect by way of the heart.' The playful element in CW should not, however be confused with a lax and unregulated use of language. On the contrary, CW requires a willing submission on the part of the writer to the 'rules' of the sub-genre being undertaken. If you want to write a Limerick, then you have to follow the rules governing limericks. If not, what you produce will be something other than a limerick: obvious, perhaps, but important too. The interesting thing is that the very constraints which the rules impose seem to foster rather than restrict the creativity of the writer. This apparent paradox is explained partly by the deeper processing of thought and language which the rules require.

What are the benefits of CW for learners?

- CW aids language development at all levels: grammar, vocabulary, phonology and discourse. It requires learners to manipulate the language in interesting and demanding ways in attempting to express uniquely personal meanings. In doing so, they necessarily engage with the language at a deeper level of processing than with most expository texts. (Craik and Lockhart 1972) The gains in grammatical accuracy and range, in the appropriacy and originality of lexical choice, in sensitivity to rhyme, rhythm, stress and intonation, and in the way texts hang together are significant.
- As mentioned above, a key characteristic of CW is a willingness to play with the language. In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in the role of play in language acquisition. (Carter 2004, Cook 2000, Crystal 1998) In some ways, the sunami of the Communicative Approach has done a disservice to language teaching by its insistence on the purely communicative functions of language. Proponents of 'play' point out, rightly, that in L1 acquisition, much of the language encountered by and used by children is in the form of rhythmical chants and rhymes, word games, jokes and the like. Furthermore, such playfulness survives into adulthood, so that many social encounters are characterized by language play (punning, spontaneous jokes, 'funny voices', metathesis, and a discourse which is shaped by quasi-poetic repetition (Tannen 1989)). These are precisely the kinds of things L2 learners are encouraged to do in CW activities.

This playful element encourages them to play creatively with the language, and in so doing, to take the risks without which learning cannot take place in any profound sense. As Crystal (1998) states, 'Reading and writing do not have to be a prison house. Release is possible. And maybe language play can provide the key.'

- Much of the teaching we do tends to focus on the left side of the brain, where our logical faculties are said to reside. CW puts the emphasis on the right side of the brain, with a focus on feelings, physical sensations, intuition and musicality. This is a healthy restoration of the balance between logical and intuitive faculties. It also affords scope for learners whose hemisphere dominance or learning-style preferences may not be intellectual or left brain dominant, and who, in the normal process of teaching are therefore at a disadvantage.
- Perhaps most notable is the dramatic increase in self-confidence and self-esteem which CW tends to develop among learners. Learners also tend to discover things for themselves about the language… and about themselves too, thus promoting personal as well as linguistic growth. Inevitably, these gains are reflected in a corresponding growth in positive motivation. Among the conditions for promoting motivation, Dornyei (2001: 138-144) cites:

"5. Create a pleasant and supportive atmosphere.
6. Promote the development of group cohesiveness.
13. Increase the students' expectation of success in particular tasks and in learning in general.
17. Make learning more stimulating and enjoyable by breaking the monotony of classroom events.
18. Make learning stimulating and enjoyable by increasing the attractiveness of tasks.
19. Make learning stimulating and enjoyable for learners by enlisting them as active task participants.
20. Present and administer tasks in a motivating way.
23. Provide students with regular experiences of success.
24. Build your learners' confidence by providing regular encouragement.
28. Increase student motivation by promoting cooperation among the learners.
29. Increase student motivation by actively promoting learner autonomy.
33. Increase learner satisfaction.
34. Offer rewards in a motivational manner."

- All these conditions are met in a well-run CW class. The exponential increase in motivation is certainly supported by my own experience in teaching CW. Learners suddenly realize that they can write something in a foreign language that has never been written by anyone else before, and which others find interesting to read. (Hence the importance of 'publishing' students' work in some form.) And they experience not only a pride in their own products but also a joy in the 'flow' of the process. (Czsikszentmihaly 1997).

- Finally, CW feeds into more creative reading. It is as if, by getting inside the process of creating the texts, learners come to understand intuitively how such texts function, and this makes similar texts easier to read. Likewise, the development of aesthetic reading skills (Kramsch 1993, Rosenblatt 1978), provides the learner with a better understanding of textual construction, and this feeds into their writing.

And teachers?

I argued in the first article that teachers, as well as learners, should engage with extensive reading. In the same spirit, I would argue that there are significant benefits to teachers if they participate in CW.

- There is little point in exhorting learners to engage in CW unless we do so too. The power of the teacher as model, and as co-writer is inestimable.
- CW is one way of keeping teachers' English fresh and vibrant. For much of our professional lives we are in thrall to the controlled language of textbook English and the repeated low level error-laden English of our students. As teachers of language, we surely have a responsibility to keep our primary resource alive and well.
- CW seems to have an effect on the writer's level of energy in general. This tends to make teachers who use CW more interesting to be around, and this inevitably impacts on their relationships with students.
- The experimental stance with regard to writing in general appears to fee back into the teaching of writing. Teachers of CW tend also to be better teachers of writing in general

My evidence for these assertions is largely anecdotal, backed by a survey of writing teachers I conducted in 2006. One of the interesting facts to emerge was a widespread belief among teachers of writing that CW had a positive effect on students' writing of Expository texts and helped them develop that much- desired but rarely-delivered 'authentic voice'.

Space does not allow me to expand on these findings, nor on some of the possible activities teachers might try. I will attempt to make good these omissions in some of my blogs during the month of December. I will also make reference there to ways in which CW intersects with some of our major current concerns. Meantime, anyone interested could sample some of the books from the list below: Fry (2007), Koch (1990), Matthews (1994), Spiro (2004, 2007), Whitworth (2001) and Wright and Hill (2009)

References

Carter, R. (2004). *Language and creativity: the art of common talk.* London: Routledge.

Cszikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). *Creativity: Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention.* New York: Harper Perennial.

Cook, G. (2000). *Language play: Language learning.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Craik, F.I.M and R.S Lockhart (1972). Levels of processing: a framework for memory research. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behaviour. 11,* 671-685.

Crystal, David (1998). *Language play.* London: Penguin.

Dörnyei, Zoltan (2001). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fry, Stephen (2007). *The ode less travelled.* London: Arrow Books.

Koch, Kenneth (1990). *Rose, where did you get that red?* New York: Vintage Books.

Kramsch, Claire (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Matthews, Paul (1994). *Sing me the Creation.* Stroud: Hawthorne Press.

Rosenblatt, Louise (1978). *The Reader, the text, the poem.* Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press.

Spiro, Jane (2004). *Creative poetry writing.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Spiro, Jane (2007). *Storybuilding.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tannen, Deborah (1989). *Talking Voices: Repetition, dialogue, and imagery in conversational discourse.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Whitworth, John (2001). *Writing poetry.* London: A and C Black.

Wright, Andrew and David S. Hill (2009). *Writing stories.* Innsbruck: Helbling.

By Alan Maley