

Online Instruction and Creative Writing by Saudi EFL Freshman Students

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Abstract

This study shows how online courses encouraged non-native freshman students to write poems and short stories in English as a foreign language.

Keywords: *creative writing, college writing, EFL, second language.*

1. Introduction

Little attention is paid to the nurturance of students' creative potential in American schools, as emphasis is most often placed on rote, repetitive learning (Shaughnessy, 1991). The literature contains many suggestions for enhancing creativity in the classroom setting, such as refraining from discounting odd or unusual questions from students, finding something positive in all ideas, systematically rewarding creativity, demanding creativity of students, giving credit for creativity in grading, and modeling creative behaviors.

To many instructors and students, creativity in a foreign language classroom is a dream. Writing is even looked upon as a chore by instructors as well as students. Students are always hesitant to write because they cannot generate ideas and because they are afraid of making mistakes. Instructors find grading essays with all kind of errors a tedious rather than an enjoyable task. Latest developments in educational technology, however, have shown that word processors, computer programs, e-mail, computer networks, the Internet, and online journaling have been utilized to develop L1 and L2 students' writing abilities. For example, Scott (1990) suggested ways to help students using Systeme-D, a word processing program for creative writing in French, exploit more of the linguistic features of the program aside from the dictionary section. Casella (1989) found the word processor to be an effective tool that helps students compose poetry because of its formatting features and ease of revision.

In a study by Gammon (1989), a computer program titled "The Bald Headed Chicken," enabled primary-level students, as well as limited-English-speaking students, to manipulate graphics and text, to create their own stories and to save them on disk or print them. The effects of two computer-based writing tools (text-based "FrEd Writer" and graphics-based "Once Upon a Time") on the story-writing skills of nine students (grades 4 to 8) with language-related learning disabilities were compared by Bahr et al. (1996). Group results did not clearly favor either tool; however, individual differences suggested that use of computer-presented planning features should be linked to student needs. In a third study, Hodges (1999) recommended use of a presentation software such as PowerPoint with elementary school students to create electronic books that use a combination of text, audio, and graphics. The presentation software could be used to introduce the concept, plan the story on paper with the help of a worksheet, create the story on the computer, and share stories.

Owen (1995) used a computer network available to schools called "the Writers in Electronic Residence (WIER)" in which students posted their creative writings that were then discussed by professional writers, students, and teachers.

Meloni (1998) discussed the many reasons for using the Internet in ESL classrooms, including increased student motivation, authentic language use, global awareness, and environmental friendliness. In Keiner's study (1996), a young writer accessed KidPub, a World Wide Website that accepts stories submitted by or on behalf of children and young people under the age of 16 and publishes them, giving each story its own Webpage. With the help of a mentor, the writer published a story via this Website. The system allowed the child to track how many times her story was read, as well as reading and responding to reader correspondence.

After a new course in computer-aided writing was implemented at South Seattle Community College (SSCC), a group of instructors met to evaluate the possibility of applying computer-aided instructional tools to the teaching of writing in College Transfer and ESL courses at SSCC. Bentley & Bourret (1991) found that individuals used English lab computers more than whole classes. The advantages cited by teachers included the speed and ease of revisions, software providing drill and practice on skills, and professional look of student papers. The disadvantages cited were increased demand on students' time, student

over-reliance on spelling and thesaurus programs, and the inability of computers to store previous drafts of writing.

Nonnative students in an intermediate pre-academic ESL course responded to writing prompts using electronic mail and word processing. Their writing was examined for differences in uses of cohesive features, length of text produced in each medium, and differences in text-initial contextualization. Electronic mail writing was found to improve academic writing abilities (Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2001).

Although word-processors, computer programs and e-mail were widely used in developing students' writing, little research has been conducted on online journaling as a literacy practice. A case study by Guzzetti & Gamboa (2005) explored how and why adolescents choose to read and compose online journals as electronic texts. Their study described how two adolescent girls responded to post-typographical texts, design their own texts and how each used online journaling for social connection, identity formation and representation, and as a link to school literacy assignments.

A review of the literature has also showed that studies that investigated the role of online courses in developing EFL students' creative writing skills are lacking. In the past six semesters the author has used online courses with Blackboard and Nicenet in teaching writing, grammar, vocabulary and reading courses to EFL freshman students as a supplement to in-class instruction. Each semester, she had between 5-9 students who were creative writers who were able to write their own poems, short stories and essays. The presents study aims to explore online creative writing by Saudi EFL freshman college students. It will find out whether creative writing is related to proficiency level in English; what the characteristics of students' creative writings are; what the characteristics of the online EFL creative writers are, and what online environmental conditions and strategic approaches impacted EFL students' creativity.

It is believed that teachers can do much to nurture creativity in the EFL classroom. Therefore, this study will show how EFL instructors can become actively involved in teaching creative writing to their students, how they can arrange a creative online learning environment, and what online writing tasks might be used.

2. Subjects

In the past 6 semesters (Fall 2003 to Spring 2006), I taught writing, grammar, vocabulary, and reading to 6 groups of freshman students at the College of Languages and Translation, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. All of the students enrolled in those courses were exposed to a combination of in-class and online instruction using Blackboard or Nicenet. Students were all Saudi and were all native speakers of Arabic. Their median age was 18 years, and the range was 17-19. They all had 6 years of EFL instruction in grades 6-12 prior to their admission to COLT. In each group, I had between 5-9 creative student writers (5-10%). The subjects of the present study consisted of a total of 38 EFL creative student writers. They were all female and in their first semester of college. Some were A students, some were average and some were below average.

3. In-class Instruction

Students in the 6 groups (creative as well as non-creative students) were exposed to the same in-class instruction that depended on the textbook. They covered the same topics, did all the exercises in class, and took the same tests. While doing the exercises, the author monitored students' work and provided individual help. Only errors related to rules under study were highlighted. Feedback was provided on the presence and location of errors but no correct forms were provided. The students had to check the errors themselves. Extra credit was given to students who could do all the items in an exercise correctly and within the designated time.

4. Online Instruction

Classroom instruction in each course was supplemented by an online course. Two groups used Blackboard and 4 used Nicenet. The students used their own PC's and the Internet from home as it was inaccessible from campus due to wiring difficulties. I initiated online instruction by posting a welcome note and starting a thread in "Conferencing" or 'Discussion Board'. The first thread is always called "Welcome" and it requires the students to introduce themselves. Every week, grammar and writing websites were added in the 'External Links' and "Link Sharing" tools according to the specific skill or topic covered in class. The students had to respond to the thread and answer the questions posted. Regardless of the course I taught, all the questions required production. The students were allowed to post their own threads on a theme they had studied in the book or any theme of their choice. They could post the stories and poems

that they had read and liked to share with others. They felt free to e-mail each other or e-mail me on any occasion like a student's birthday, religious and national holidays or whenever they needed help. They could respond to or comment on whatever is posted by me or by any classmate.

Shortly after the beginning of the semester, a student asked if she could post anything. To my surprise, she posted a poem that she wrote. The students, as well as myself, were extremely thrilled. She received compliments and I gave gifts and her extra credit. Soon few more students had the courage to post their own poems. In the following semesters, I started to tell the students that I had creative writers in my previous courses and would like them to write their own poems and stories and post them on the discussion board. Few would respond. I would also ask creative students in level 2 to participate in the online course used by level I students and would ask them to post examples of their poems as a model for novice creative writers in level I.

In all online courses, I encouraged the students to express themselves and write for communication and not to worry about grammatical, spelling, capitalization, punctuation and indentation mistakes. I never edited their posts nor corrected their errors. Positive comments were always given. I always told them how proud and happy I was about their creative writing. Students were always supportive in their comments. They were enthusiastic and felt free to write and not to worry about mistakes. They were given extra credit for writing their own poems and stories.

I also posted the students' poems in the World Arab Translators' Association (WATA) where creative writers received positive feedback and words of encouragement and admiration from WATA members especially EFL college professors. I displayed samples of the students' poems and stories in the First Language and Culture Exhibit organized by our college. Whenever we had extracurricular activities at the university, I would have some student poets read their poems. Sometimes we would bring our books, stories and magazines and read in the garden. I would also post poetry websites for them to read.

As an EFL instructor I always feel that every student can learn if she is encouraged to try and if she feels secure to make mistakes. I also believe that every student has creativity and imagination, and a teacher's role is to nurture those qualities. I acknowledge and reinforce

occasions when students exhibit the slightest improvement and use marks and other incentives to encourage them.

5. Data Collection and Analysis:

A sample of 54 poems, short stories and essays were collected from the 38 creative student writers (range = 1-8). Each was examined in terms of theme, errors, style and sophistication level. Each student's course grade was also obtained.

Each creative student writer was interviewed and asked the following questions: (1) Have been to the US or UK? (2) Did you study English Abroad? (3) Did you study in a public or private school? (4) What are your hobbies? (5) Do you watch English movies and cartoon films? (6) Which language do you speak at home? (7) How did the online course help you to write poetry? (8) Would you have written poetry if you were not using the online course? Why?

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 Correlation between Creativity and Achievement

It was found that creative writing did not correlate with the students' proficiency level in English. Above average, average and below average students wrote poems and stories. This result is in agreement with prior studies. A literature review by Toth & Baker (1990) both affirmed and denied a relationship between creativity and public school achievement.

6.2 Characteristics of Students' Creative Writing:

All creative writers produced poems and stories that were meaningful and original although 20% of the themes were inspired by the themes covered in the textbook or stories that I wrote about myself and posted in the online course. Students tended to express their feelings and emotional (affective) involvement with a personal experience that they had. Poems and stories were written at their own ability level and from personal vocabulary. Students of a high proficiency level showed more verbal originality and verbal flexibility. They used more sophisticated themes, vocabulary and sentence structure, used innovative expressions and made fewer grammatical and spelling errors. Everyday spoken English was

more evident in less proficient writers. They tended to spell words the way they pronounce them and use e-mail language such as *ur* and *cause* (See Appendix).

6.3 Characteristics of Creative Writers

Creative writers in the present study tended to be intrinsically motivated, enthusiastic, outgoing and many had a sense of humor. They originated the highest number of posts (50-150) in their groups. They used nicknames whenever they responded to their classmates/compliments. Traveling, studying abroad and speaking English at home were not factors leading to creative writing. The best creative writer, Layla, went to a public school, never traveled and studied abroad. Reading a lot, and watching English movies and cartoon films on TV were common factors among all creative writers. Few were motivated by other creative classmates and had a sense of competitiveness (see Appendix). They had strong interpersonal relationships and were informal. A review of the literature by Helson (1996) on the characteristics of creative individuals showed that creative individuals did share strong symbolic interests, independence, and high aspirations. Sulaf wrote:

I have lots and lots of hobbies like reading novels!!! I am a book worm! and writing is my life !I like to write whatever I think of! I will start writing in this site instead of papers:)! I also like drawing cartoon characters. I like playing with the piano when I have nothing to do, I like to play every song I hear!! I like to bake chocolate chip cookies, as a matter of fact its the only thing I am good at in cooking beside fried eggs! lol!! I will get you some one day, you will love it!!!!

6.4 Factors Affecting Creative Writing

Interviews with creative writers showed that the online learning environment had the most positive effect on their creativity and on their attitude towards writing. They reported that the online course made writing an enjoyable task. It provided an environment secure for making mistakes. Their motivation and sense of achievement were enhanced. I created an open and supportive online and classroom environment, where creative writing was accepted and encouraged, and students were encouraged to trust their own linguistic ability. I nurture their creativity in every way possible. The students dived into the writing task because it was exciting, challenging, and fun. They felt comfortable and unthreatened to reach maximal creativity. A warm and positive personal relationship with their classmates and instructor was fostered. Environmental friendliness and a sense of humor and playfulness prevailed in the online course. Peer support and feedback among novice creative writers was also important.

Creative writers received positive feedback. The students also indicated that in a traditional classroom, their classmates would not have a chance to read their poems and stories and that they would not receive as much support and encouragement from them. At home, most parents do not know English and will give the feedback and support they needed. They indicated that without the online course they would not have written what they have written.

Several researchers emphasized the effect of a supportive learning environment and of peer feedback. Hyland (1993) indicated that use of word processors for developing writing skills of foreign language students created unrealistically high expectations regarding learning gains and indicated that only teachers could improve the situation through a supportive learning environment. Essex (1996) highlighted the effectiveness of peer feedback in teaching creative writing to elementary school students. In addition, Kaufman, Gentile & Baer's study (2005) supported the use of peer feedback among gifted novice creative writers.

7. Conclusion

My experience with six groups of EFL freshman students shows that creative writing does not require a special talent nor a high proficiency level in EFL. It is not difficult to achieve creativity in the EFL classroom. Instructors need to encourage the students to write for communication rather than focus on grammatical and spelling correctness. Positive feedback is essential. Creative writers need an online learning environment that is friendly, supportive, and secure for trial and error. They need to feel free to express themselves and need to feel good about themselves and what they can do and achieve. Therefore, this study recommends use of online courses in EFL instruction. It also recommends increasing the amount of time spent on interactive rather than independent writing. Publishing the students' poems and short stories and tracking the number of times poems and stories are read, as well as reading and responding to readers' reactions may enhance students' creative writing ability.

Poetry can be used in the adult ESL classroom with all learners, even those with limited literacy and proficiency in English (Peyton & Rigg, 1999). It provides rich learning opportunities in language, content, and community building. Repetition of words and structures typifies poetry, and poetry encourages language play with rhythmic and rhyming devices. Poetic themes are often universal. When teachers and students write and read poetry together, they connect with texts and with one another in powerful ways. Teaching great

poetry to students can enhance students' perceptions, improve their writing, challenge their minds, and enrich their lives as well (Certo, 2004).

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Appendix

Example (1)

PS.: The excerpts given below are not edited. They were copied from the online courses the way they were posted by the students. The students are of different proficiency levels.

Hi Ms. the Best,

Congratulations Prof. Reima. You've been nominated for the best teacher I've ever met and you won. Because you are the best teacher I've ever known, I will never forget a person like you and that's why I don't want you to forget me. I hope this card will help you to do so. I learned from you a lot. You inspired me. I really respect you more than you know. I admit in the first class I didn't like you, but in the end after knowing you I really liked and loved the person you are and respected you a lot.

The other reason to give you this card is to tell you that I'm so happy with what I've accomplished this semester, and since you played a part in making me so happy you deserve at least a word like: Thank you.

Thanks & Sorry:

Thanks for everything you did to help us understand our lessons.

Thanks for the website that improved my writing a lot.

Thanks for sharing your great stories with us.

Thanks for spending your time answering our questions and explaining with details.

Thanks for being so tough & strict in the beginning with me and the other students, because that helped me, personally, and the other students to be the way we are today.

Thanks for being so nice in the end with me and the other students.

Thanks to Allah you are my teacher.

Sorry for annoying you, asking questions just before one day of the exam.

Sorry if I ever did something wrong without saying sorry.

Sorry if we didn't meet your expectations as hard working students.

Sorry for coming late the last class.

Sorry for giving you a hard time to make us understand the summery and other things.

I wish you the best, and a life full of joy.

See you after two weeks or so.

Your Student
Najla Mawaly

Example (2)

Our Grammar Class

By Arwa Zaid Hussain

In our lovely classroom of grammar that feels like a real dream
 Ms. Reima links things together, for our cake she is the cream
 She is nice, funny and caring; she makes us nearly want to scream
 Our book and her eyes are blue like the adorable sky it seem

We learned how to fit and join words like deem
 Verb, sentences 'noun, adjectives, are all on Scheme
 The message of knowledge enters our brains like a Beam
 Exciting, interesting, and thrilling, like a movie seen

Grammar 191 gives our language its meaningful and correct Theme
 We all work together shoulder to shoulder, we are one great team
 All of us are interactive, energetic; we blow thoughts, ideas like Steam
 We all row our boat of education and science in the KSU stream

Example (3)

Life

By Layla Al-Hoshan

*In a jungle, we live
 Where only the strongest lead and the weak must give
 Where there is only darkness
 .. a bright sky is a myth
 Where freedom is far-fetched
 .. a lost hope, buried in the depth
 No matter how far you walk
 You will never find an exit
 This jungle is complicated, poisoned and broken
 No one can fix it
 Your friend in the night
 Might be your enemy at dawn
 That evil jungle has its spell on every living soul
 Be careful when you walk
 Because every where there is a hole
 That is our life, indeed
 Where you can be killed, for doing a good deed!*

Example (4)

Hello there evrybody,
 My name is Farah Al-Sweel. Im 18 years old. Im a fellow colleague to most of you out there, only a mere gawky level one student with nothing but a high-school degree up her sleeve to the great Professor Reima. Who we all look upon with admiration and respect. Of course I dont plan on staying with that description. I hope one day that I, too will be great. Hopefully this is the beginning of something. Thank you Prof. Reima, thank you and all other instructors out there who work their hardest to broaden our horizons. Not that I've met any as hardworking as you. Wish us luck Prof. Reima, wish us luck in pursuing our dreams and ambitions. Thanks again.

Ps: I kind of noticed something as I was reading the rest of what the girls posted. Why do all the girls here seem to be only proud of their brothers? I, too have a brother. Im not proud of him at all. Why should I be proud of what he does, when here it is so easy for him to accomplish anything. I, on the other hand am proud of my sister (who is also named Reima). She is working hard to get her masters degree all the way in California. Now thats something I should flaunt and be proud of. Thank you.

Example (5)

Hunted

By Fatma Abdul-Mughni

I shed a tear but not for you
 I cried my pain but not from you
 But its all caused by you
 Every time I close my eyes
 Every time I had a dream
 I see your face its hunting me
 This is not what I want it to be
 This is a true misery
 You had left me here with no shelter
 You smiled to me and you were gone with no warning
 Is this your idea of good bye
 Smile at me then say please don't drop by
 You touched my cheeks then say don't cry I promise you I'll Be there when
 close ur eyes
 And since then I've been hunted by your face

Example (6)

When I feel Sad
 by Haifa Al-Homoud

*When I feel sad
 I never go to bed
 I want to be happy
 so I get ready
 To do some thing
 but not strange
 try to have smile
 and quiet for a while
 I change the shape of my room
 Take a paper and write a poem
 go to buy flower
 Forget the hour
 If you have sadness
 Try to do this
 Then you say
 How beautiful are they*

REPLIES

FROM: Prof. Reima Al-Jarf

SUBJECT: Good poem

This is very good Haifa. I like it very much. it is cute and light. Keep on trying.

FROM: arwa zaid al hussain

Although its sad , but I like it , don't be sad we are with you when you need us

FROM: Layla Al-Hoshan

Very good Haifa ! It describes your feelings loud and clear. Keep your pen moving !

FROM: fatima al-abd ulmughni sorry i'm late hayoofi its just i was alittle busy last 2 daysyour poem is really nice n discribing thank you dear for this wonderful writing of urs keep it up by the way u'll never be sad when i'm around. lool just kidding
bye

FROM: Haifa Al-Homoud

hi Prof. Reima

thanks for replying and thanks for these great world, its make me happy and i well keep on trying.. thanks alot Prof.

hi Arwa,

thanks arwa, i'm not sad but thats a feel. every body in this world feel sad some times, thats normal. thanks alot agian and have a nice day.

best wishes ..

haifa

hi layla..
i am glad you like it thanks alot.. and i will by keep on writing..

hi fatmah..
dont by sorry sis its ok and i happy you like it..
best wishes..
haifa

FROM: Asma Al Ghamdi

Hi Prof.Reima,
Hi girls,
Thank you Haifa for this cute poem ...well done ..and good for u.

FROM: Maryam AL-Qassim

your poem is very integral, I love it. actually I do not know the rules for writing a poem ,,," but I will try.

*I want to be alone
I won't say a word
I know it's insane
but, what're you going to say
I'll try to be a wise
I'll remove all the mist
I know I have a mistake
(*when I feel sad*)
I'll fall down and cry
in that case ,,,
I'll wish I'm die*

THANKS ,

REPLIES

FROM: Haifa Al-Homoud

hi asma..
thanks for replying sis and i happy you like it

hi maryam
thaks alot for your nice wrde i happy you love it and really this is god try sis keep on trying..
best wishes
haifa

FROM: Prof. Reima Al-Jarf

I am glad this website is inspiring to my young poets. I am glad my lovely students are searching within themselves and trying to do something. This is how we learn to write, when we feel the need and enthusiasm to write. I also like the friendly and supportive atmosphere in here, and the fact that each of you is appreciating her other classmates. May Allah bless you all! As a teacher, I feel great.

Example (7)

FROM: Prof. Reima Al-Jarf

Congratulations to our young poet Layla!

Today was one of the brightest days in my 16-year teaching career, as two of my students were really outstanding. Layla presented a poem of hers and Mashael (in Level 5) presented her first field study in front of a large audience. You made me really proud and hopeful at a time when many young people are busy with fashion, video clips, movies, Star Academy and the like.

I was so proud to learn that everybody was impressed by your talent. Keep up the good work and I am sure there is a great future ahead of you. May God bless you!

FROM: Layla Al-hoshan

Dr.Reima ..

Thank you for your splendid words .. these words give me a great push forward .. You don't have an idea about how much I'm happy.. Reading your post added a beautiful taste to my memories of this semester

Thanks

FROM: Prof. Reima Al-Jarf

SUBJECT: Your Poems in WATA

I have posted your poems in the WATA website. I used your first names only. I need your permission to add the middle or last name. Here are the links:

FROM: Layla Al-Hoshan Thank you very much doctor for posting our poems! I can not describe the joy and pride I feel now. Of course you can add my last name if you like. You should not even ask for my permission.

FROM: fatima abdul mughni

wow thx prof am reaaaaal honored . Of cours u could write my name i'm all urs prof ur free to do what u like and tank u thank u soooo very much i feel big lol. bye.