CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES FOR TEACHING CREATIVE WRITING

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Writing encourages students to be creative, use their imagination and produce original ideas; it provides a wide variety of activities in the classroom which, taught properly, can be very enjoyable and motivating. The article examines various techniques which enable students to develop their writing skills and language abilities. The focus is put on the methods which help organise classes in such a way that they will serve the needs of students in the most effective manner, enrich their language and creative competence.

Creative writing, classroom activities, students' errors, editing skills.

It is a popular belief that writing is one the most difficult skills for learners to master since it is connected not only with the form of organising ideas but also with making these ideas readable. On the other hand, teaching writing is a very useful and interesting activity because a piece of written work serves as evidence for students that they are making progress in the language. The learners are able to work at their own pace which is often very relaxing for them; teachers have a possibility to work with the students individually, get to know them personally and, hence, sort out their difficulties.

In recent years the writing skill has become one of the most widely disputed subjects among linguists and non-linguists, literary critics and methodologists, academicians and business people. Some researchers (Byrne 1988, Dakowska 2005, Raimes 1983, Rivers & Temperly 1978) analyse the shared and contrasting characteristics of speaking, reading, listening and writing skills, and focus on integrated study of these four aspects of language leaning; others (Owtram 2010, Ventola and Mauranen 1996, Fitzmaurice 2002, Charles *et al.*, 2009) are concerned with the issues of academic writing and its pragmatic aspects. A large corpus of works is dedicated to the investigation of rhetoric patterns and stylistic peculiarities in various written texts (Artemeva & Freedman 2006, Butler 2008, Hewings 2006, Reinking and Osten 2011) as well as the challenges which ESL and EFL academic students are facing in higher education contexts (Cumming 2006, Hinkel 2004, Paltridge 2009, Reid 2006, Richards and Miller 2005).

The purpose of the present research is to provide some helpful techniques that can be used for developing students' creative writing skills and improving their language performance. A special attention will be paid to various ways of eliminating students' errors and improving their editing skills. It should be noted, however, that the creative potential of both teachers and the learners is limitless, therefore, teaching facilities, learning styles and the

techniques to be employed in the language classroom become more and more varied and thus will be the subjects for further research.

Writing is a very demanding skill for both teachers and learners and its complexity requires patience, careful planning and organisation of work in the lesson. Teachers should choose such classroom techniques and skills integration activities that will help students express their ideas in a meaningful and interesting way and write with more confidence. Besides, as Byrne (1988:7) underlines, teachers should concentrate on practical values of writing in such a way that the learners see the purpose of writing and make progress.

According to Tribble (1996:36,95), there are three principal ways of teaching creative writing: focus on form, focus on writer, and focus on the reader. Let us consider how these three focuses can be set up in the classroom.

Before students make their first steps in independent writing they need to be exposed to appropriate models of written language, taught the structure and organisation of various texts taken from course books, newspapers, magazines, anthologies etc. It is advisable that these materials were chosen in accordance with the topics discussed in the language lesson, were realistic (capable of being used by the learners, cheap enough to be available, actually in hand), interesting (varied and intellectually satisfying), encouraging (making the learners feel they are making progress or at least enjoying their learning), relevant to the particular point in the learners' progress, their aims and age group, related to practice and a specific purpose.

Students should feel and behave like real writers. Therefore, in the lesson of creative writing the stress must be placed on developing creative thinking, which the teacher can stimulate by giving the students a chance to express themselves in accordance with their needs and interests as well as making helpful suggestions or questions while commenting on the students' drafts. Another good way to arouse students' motivation for creativity is to explain to them the nature of the creative process and analyse the views and methods of some popular outstanding writers. For example, teachers may draw students' attention to the fact that the task of a writer is to make the strange things familiar and the familiar – strange. If things, ideas or people are familiar to us we stop thinking about them; a problem well illustrated by the saying: 'God hides things from us by putting them near us.' If we see things or people repeatedly we hardly observe them at all unless there is some change from the familiar or predictable to unusual or extraordinary; seeing them as unique, problematic, or half-known restarts the engines of our minds. Below the surface of familiarity there is a wonderful unknown world to be explored. In order to develop observation skills it is useful to take something that we frequently see or experience in our everyday life and reflect or meditate on the object, concentrating on what we do not know about it. As Adair (2007:8) aptly notes, we recognise creativity where the artist or thinker of genius has transformed the materials at hand into a new creation of enduring value. The Irish writer William Trevor, who is widely regarded as one of the greatest contemporary writers of novels and short stories in the English language, sees

his role as an observer of human nature and emphasises the importance of curiosity for a writer. In one of his interviews he said: "I write out of curiosity more than anything else. That's why I write about women, because I'm not a woman and I don't know what it's like. The excitement of it is to know more about something that I'm not and can't be" (IS 2).

Metaphors and analogies trigger creative writing as well. Frequently the two things we juxtapose by analogising are very different, yet the creative mind may notice something that connects them; this plays a key role in imaginative thinking. By using effective, unusual and well-crafted metaphors writers can intensify and enliven their images, and make readers think about some ideas in a new way. Metaphors and comparisons are used to describe people, places, things and actions, and can be constructed with objects that are either akin or incredibly dissimilar to each other, as long as one gives deeper meaning to them. Although powerful metaphors do enrich writing, writers do not need a huge number of them, because forced metaphors will distract more than they enlighten. The metaphors and other stylistic devices should develop naturally. Moreover, it is necessary to avoid mixing metaphors, i.e. not to compare one thing to two or more different things; the best metaphors communicate an idea simply and clearly and create one strong image at a time. Also dead, stale metaphors and comparisons will add nothing to the creative work.

Students should be aware of the fact that any piece of writing has to establish a communicative purpose and maintain contact with the reader. It is essential to capture the reader's attention in the first paragraph, even in the initial sentence; otherwise the story will rarely encourage further exploration. Delaying this technique the author risks losing the reader. Why should a reader continue if not intrigued by the opening? As the story develops the writer will have to provide clues that lead to an unanticipated conclusion to ensure that the reader's satisfaction will be ensured. As Rieser (2002) states, there is no more devastating an effect on a story than betraying a thoroughly captured reader with an unsatisfying, unfulfilling denouement. The researcher also advises creating intrigue through the introduction of some kind of difficulty that needs to be overcome: it can be an antagonist, a situation, an anomaly, a controversy, a confrontation or a puzzle, but something must be done to stick in the reader's attention, to guarantee that they will look for a solution (IS 1).

Teachers should focus both on making students creative and developing their editing skills at the same time. It is very important to teach them to put themselves in the shoes of the readers of their writing and be able to self-edit, because no matter how good the ideas are, mistakes may frustrate or mislead the reader. Students must be able to look at their pieces of writing critically. As indicated by Rivers and Temperley (1978:322), they should check their drafts not only for grammar, punctuation and spelling mistakes, but also consider formation of paragraphs, development of thought, elimination of repetitions, usage of complex and compound sentences, and various means of linking ideas. Learners should be able to select the appropriate style, formal or informal, depending on what they are writing and whom they are addressing,

and then polish the text, i.e. see whether the sentence types and vocabulary are varied and correspond with the style of their composition.

Students usually make errors when they want to express something that they are not yet able to do as their knowledge of the language is not sufficient. Haycraft (1986:120) notices that the main problem with writing concerns students' tendency to translate from their own language, which is a very bad habit and very difficult to eliminate. Teachers have to help students think and express themselves in an English way by surrounding them with the target language as much as possible so that it actually becomes inconvenient for them to think in their native language.

Students' errors can also be eliminated through a number of exercises (for instance, completing sentences or combining sentences, changing words to clauses, questions to statements, present to past, plural to singular and so on) and through integrated language skills activities (such as: reading, listening, speaking, project work, simulations, using the internet). The emphasis should be placed both on quantity and quality, audience and content, grammar and vocabulary, syntax and style. White and Arndt (1991:117,124) also advise letting the students evaluate the compositions of their classmates; this makes them more observant readers of their own work and build up capacity for self-assessment. Both teachers and students have to treat errors with seriousness and care; however, the concern about the errors cannot be allowed to dominate.

Students should learn how to improve their writing and express their meaning fluently, logically and accurately. They need to analyse their thoughts, shaping them into central and subordinate ideas, and develop lines of thought which carry their readers to the heart of the matter. It is important to focus attention on how the paragraphs are formed, how the thought is developed, and whether the ideas are linked coherently with appropriate rhetorical devices that organise the text into the whole. Byrne (1988:17-19) divides these rhetorical resources into three categories:

1) logical devices – words or phrases concerning meaning relationship between sentences; these are linking words used in order to express opinion, to list advantages and disadvantages, to list points into a specific sequence, to add more points to the same topic, to refer to other sources, to express cause/effect/purpose/difference, to give examples, to make contrasting points and so on;

2) grammatical devices – references or anaphoras which indicate relationships between sentences and are as important for the cohesion of a text as logical devices, for instance, *it*, *this*, *the*, *here*, *there*, *at that time* etc;

3) lexical devices – these are mainly key words, synonyms and antonyms that are essential elements of linking sentences together into a coherent text.

Concluding remarks

This research has demonstrated how teachers by providing students with professional guidelines can stimulate their creative abilities, evoke in them

curiosity and the need to write, expand their knowledge and increase their confidence and motivation.

Clearly, students may face a lot of difficulties while writing, most of which result from limited knowledge of vocabulary, grammatical and syntactical patterns, and lack of ability to think in a foreign language like in a native tongue. This, however, should not discourage students from undertaking the tasks. Thus, the teacher's task is to make the students feel enthusiastic about the opportunity to express their opinions, thoughts and feelings, providing them with stimulating and absorbing topics as well as using some techniques that develop their creative thinking, among others: by making helpful suggestions and questions while commenting on the their drafts, explaining to them the nature of the creative process, analysing the views and methods of some popular writers, along with teaching various stylistic devices and expressive means that make the narrative more attractive and emphatic. Besides that, it is important to focus both on making students creative and on developing their editing skills at the same time.

Planning the content of a writing course and drawing up a syllabus it is important to take into consideration students' personal experience, their engagement, motivation, purpose of writing, as well as social and cultural issues. Thus, the effective syllabus should include, among others, the following elements:

- organisation and structure of various language registers;
- a wide variety of sentence and grammar patterns;
- rich vocabulary on various topics such as: education, housing, health, social problems, human relationships etc;
- different kinds of exercises to practice punctuation, grammar and correct spelling;
- rhetorical activities, such as: describing, telling a story, comparing and contrasting, defining, explaining, classifying, arguing, illustrations etc;
- various skills and processes, such as: generating ideas, revising, effective beginnings and endings.

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