

USING LITERATURE TO DEVELOP WRITING COMPETENCE: HOW TO WRITE FAIRY TALES AND POEMS

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to show how EFL students of *Letras Licenciatura* in English at *Universidade Federal do Pará* responded to writing fairy tales and poems as means of improving their written language skills. The activities presented here have been tested with the students and proved to be fun and effective, stimulating the students to use the language in a creative and imaginative way, promoting opportunities for EFL students to create their own pieces of literature. These activities were based on Carter and Long's (1991), Lazar's (1993) and Duff and Maley's (2002) suggestions on how to work with literature in the EFL classroom and the importance of using it to teach a foreign language.

Key words: literature, creative writing, fun, poem, fairy tale.

Resumo: O objetivo desse artigo é mostrar como estudantes de inglês como língua estrangeira do Curso de Licenciatura em Letras da Universidade Federal do Pará responderam ao uso de contos de fadas e poemas como uma maneira de melhorar suas habilidades no uso da língua. As atividades apresentadas neste artigo foram testadas pelos os alunos e provaram ser divertidas e eficientes, estimulando os estudantes a usar a língua de uma maneira criativa e imaginativa, promovendo oportunidades para alunos de inglês como língua estrangeira criarem seus próprios poemas e contos de fadas. As atividades apresentadas neste artigo foram baseadas nas sugestões de Carter e Long (1991), Lazar (1993) e Duff e Maley (2002) sobre como trabalhar com literatura nas aulas de língua estrangeira e sua importância no ensino da mesma.

Palavras Chave: literatura, escrita criativa, diversão, poema, conto de fada.

1. Introduction

Nowadays literature has been widely used in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms as a tool to teach a foreign language. While some teachers still believe that teaching a foreign language deals only with focusing on teaching the traditional areas of English, such as vocabulary or grammar, other teachers believe that they can teach vocabulary or grammar topics using a piece of literature such as poems and fairy tales in their classes. These pieces will help students communicate in the target language enabling them to learn these hard core areas using a piece of literature. Thus, teachers who have integrated literature to their classes have realized that it adds a new dimension to the EFL context. Poems, short stories, plays and novels, for example, help students to learn the four skills – speaking, writing, listening, and reading more effectively because literature can help students stimulate their imagination, develop their cultural abilities and increase their emotional awareness.

This article reports the outcomes that students had when creating poems and fairy tales to develop writing competence. In order to teach vocabulary and grammatical topics in my English classes, my students created some poems and fairy tales based on patterns or examples that were given to them. Creating a poem or a fairy tale can offer the students a chance to reveal their opinions and sentiments and besides, they have an opportunity to create their own pieces of literature. Using poems and fairy tales in our classes is very appealing and makes teaching more effective.

2. Literature in the EFL classroom

The use of literary texts in our English classes is very important not only to literature, but also to the learning process of a target language. Literary works should be used as a language learning resource enabling students to improve their learning process of a foreign language. Carter and

Long¹ mention three major tendencies when using literary texts to teach a foreign language. They are the cultural, the language and the personal growth models. The activities suggested on this paper are based on the language and personal growth models. In relation to the language model Carter and Long² refer to this approach as the “language-based approach” which enables students to work with a literary text in a methodical and systematic way focusing specifically on linguistics features such as vocabulary, grammar, syntax, etc. According Sonia Zyngier:

From the perspective of the language model, literature is taught for the promotion of vocabulary, structure or language manipulation. This model draws from rhetoric and stylistic those elements which may explain the linguistics choices of an author. In other words, literature is used to “put students in touch with some of the more subtle and varied creative uses of language” (Carter and Long, 1991, p. 2). This model depends on a more student-centered methodology based on a process-oriented pedagogy. It emphasizes language observation.³

In relation to the personal growth model the students are encouraged to express their own opinions and sentiments. It also forces the students to use their background knowledge when expressing their ideas. Cadorath and Harris⁴ mention that “text itself has no meaning; it only provides direction for the reader to construct meaning from the reader’s own experience”. To this effect, Zyngier remarks that this model:

(...) is more concerned with how students mature as individuals and how they progress through enjoying the experience of reading. It is the “literature of life” approach. It also works more

¹ CARTER, R. and LONG, M. *Teaching Literature*. Longman, 1991. p. 7.

² Ibid.

³ ZYNGIER, Sonia. Literature in the EFL Classroom: Making a Comeback? *PALA: The Poetics and Linguistics Association*, 1994. In: www.pala.ac.uk/op/Papers06.doc Accessed on 03/27/2006.

⁴ CADORATH, J. and HARRIS, S. Unplanned Classroom Language and Teacher Training. *ELT Journal*, 52/3: 188 apud SAVVIDOU, Christiane. An Integrated Approach to Teaching Literature in the EFL Classroom. *The Internet TESL Journal*, Vol. X, No. 12, Dec. 2004. In: <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Savvidou-Literature.html> Accessed on 11/5/2006.

effectively when oriented towards the learner but, rather than language observation, it promotes individual evaluation and judgement.⁵

3. Using literature to enhance EFL learning

In order to help my students develop their writing skills, an experiment was conducted with my students of *Letras*. I intended to motivate my students to create their own poems and fairy tales stimulating them to use their imagination and creativity while they were writing their own pieces of literature. To work with poems, I gave my students three patterns of poems that they would have to follow and write their own poems. To work with fairy tales, I first gave them some examples of some famous fairy tales to be read and discussed in class, calling their attention to the sequence of a fairy tale. During this discussion, I mentioned some of the thirty-one functions elaborated by Vladimir Propp⁶ to create a fairy tale.

3.1. Writing poems

The following activities will demonstrate how I worked with the three poem patterns. To help the students use adjectives, nouns, gerunds, the verb “to be”, and simple past tense correctly in a basic sentence structure, a poem pattern was given first, so they could follow the example and write their own pieces. The first poem activity was called Adjective Poem and with this activity the students had to follow the pattern (1) given below:

- (1) Line 1: Noun
- Line 2: Same noun + is or are + adjective
- Line 3: Same noun + is or are + adjective 1, adjective 2
- Line 4: Is or are + adjective 1, adjective 2, adjective 3
- Line 5: Adjective 1, adjective 2, adjective 3, adjective 4

⁵ ZYNGIER, Sonia. *Literature in the EFL Classroom: Making a Comeback?* op. cit.

⁶ VLADIMIR, Propp. *Morphology of the Folk Tale*. Trans., Laurence Scott, 2nd ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968.

Line 6: New related noun.⁷

The reason for using this poem pattern was because the students had an opportunity to practice a specific basic structure sentence such as “noun + verb to be + adjective”. They also had a chance to vary their vocabulary in relation to adjectives and to think about a word which had a very close relation to the title of the poem.

The following example (2) is an *Adjective Poem* written by an undergraduate student called *Açaí*. He wrote about a typical fruit of the state of *Pará* which is very much appreciated by its people. This fruit depending on its season becomes very expensive and rare. However, people from *Pará* love having this fruit for their meals. It is eaten with sugar and manioc flour usually for lunch or at dinner time. The student expresses all his love and admiration for a fruit that is native from his state:

(2) *Açaí*
Açaí is delicious
Açaí is delicious, expensive
Is delicious, expensive, rare
Delicious, expensive, rare, precious
Açaí Meal.

This activity enabled students to understand better the use of adjectives in a sentence structure. Some of my pupils wanted to write adverbs or even nouns where adjectives were supposed to be used. So for this activity, the dictionary was also very important because they could check their mistakes and even pay attention to some adjectives that ended in –ed and –ing such as boring, interesting, crowded and so fourth.

⁷ This activity was adapted from Holmes and Moulton’s ‘Writing Simple Poems’ apud HUSSEIN, Hawanum. Using Simple Poems to Teach Grammar. *The Internet TESL Journal*. In: <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Husseini-Poems.html>. Accessed on: 10/ 25/ 2006.

The second poem activity (3) was called *Diamond Shaped Poem* and a pattern of the following poem was given to the students:

(3) Noun
Adjective Adjective
Gerund Gerund Gerund
Noun Noun Noun Noun
Gerund Gerund Gerund
Adjective Adjective
Noun⁸

I decided to use this pattern poem with my students because I wanted to call their attention to gerunds. Students usually misunderstand the use of the –ing. Some students thought that they were going to use the present continuous tense instead of the gerund. With this activity, I had the chance to elucidate the difference between these two grammatical points. Working with this poem, the students were also allowed to check the dictionary when necessary, having the opportunity to revise nouns and adjectives, too. The following poem (4) was an example written by an undergraduate student called *Book*:

(4) Book
Pleasant Relaxing
Dreaming Smiling Changing
Comedy Adventure Mystery Romance
Crying Living Dying
Exciting Interesting
Knowledge

With this poem, the student was probably trying to express her excitement for books. It is possible to observe this close “relationship” that the student has with novels. She tells us the way she feels while she is reading, her favorite types of novels and above all, the knowledge that she will acquire when reading a book. Her background knowledge was also activated because she

⁸ Diamond Shaped Poem. In: <http://dark.wing.uoregon.edu/~leslieob/diamantes.html> Accessed on: 10/25/2006.

thought about the American writer Emily Dickinson who wrote “*There is no Frigate Like a Book*”. The narrator says that it is impossible to compare a book to any kind of means of transportation. To travel by a frigate, by a plane or by a train, we need to buy a ticket to get to our destination; however, traveling on a book, we do not pay anything for it. We will get to our destination using our imagination.

Another poem pattern (5) is the *Alphabet Poem*⁹ and it deals with helping students to revise the simple past tense. This activity forced my students to use the dictionary to check the past tense of some verbs. Students were asked to get into groups of three to work cooperatively. In order to write the poem, they had to answer the question given by the teacher and write the poem starting each letter with a verb in the simple past tense. This activity enabled students to revise simple past tense while writing some funny poems. The following example (5) was written by one of the groups:

(5) What did you do on your last vacation?

Ate pizza.

Bought three books to read on my vacation.

Carried the groceries for my mother.

Did my English homework.

Emptied the wastebaskets of my house

Found my ring under the bed

Gained four pounds

Hid my diary

Invited my friends for a party at home

Joined a rock group

Kissed a lot

Looked for a job

Met my boyfriend at a party

Needed more money to go shopping

Ordered a pizza for dinner

⁹ This activity was adapted from Holmes and Moulton’s ‘Writing Simple Poems’ apud HUSSEIN, Hawanum. *Using Simple Poems to Teach Grammar*. op. cit.

Paid my bills
Quit my Spanish classes
Read some novels
Saw the Phantom of the Opera
Traveled to Salinas
Unpacked my suitcase
Visited my grandparents
Went to the beach
X-rayed my arm
Yelled at my boyfriend
Zipped my dress up.

Working with the Alphabet Poem in my class was very rewarding because I could see how involved they got in trying to write a poem in which they had to begin the sentence using the past tense. First, I asked them to write the poem without using the dictionary, just to observe if they could remember the past tense of the verbs. When they got agitated and really anxious to check their doubts on the dictionary, I gave them the permission to use it. Many of them corrected their own mistakes and I had the opportunity to call their attention to the past tense of regular and irregular verbs. Producing a poem in a foreign language according to Collie and Slater¹⁰ can be extremely rewarding for students, “as long as the whole activity is done within a very relaxed and non-directive framework. They say that the main goal “is to crystallise a personal, felt response to a literary situation”. Poems like the ones I mentioned above can guide students to write their poems without “imposing constraints of rhythm or rhyme” and having a limited pattern of poems to follow “can be quite rewarding”.¹¹

3.2. Writing fairy tales

Another activity deals with teaching my students how to write a fairy tale. The goal of this activity was to help my students develop their writing skills in an involving and creative way

¹⁰ COLLIE, Joanne and SLATER, Stephen. *Literature in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. p.61.

¹¹ Ibid.

calling their attention especially to vocabulary and the verb tenses agreement. By analyzing types of characters, actions and behaviors, Propp in his *Morphology of the Folk Tale*,¹² identified thirty-one generic elements in the Russian Folk Tale. In these tales, he analyzed and discovered that they all had a similar structure and presented the same elements. These elements correspond to different kinds of actions that, according to Propp's analysis, always occur in the same sequence; however, a single fairy tale does not contain all the thirty-one functions.

This activity was done with my students and only twelve functions were used. The following functions (6) were the ones I used in my classes:

(6) Initial Situation

1. **Harm:** the villain harms one of the members of the family.
2. **Lack:** a family member needs or wants something.
3. **Mediation:** news of the harm or lack reaches the hero.
4. **Start of Counter- action:** the hero accepts the quest or decides to act.
5. **Departure:** the hero leaves.
6. **First function of Donor:** the hero is tested, interrogated by the donor.
7. **Reaction of the Hero:** the hero reacts.
8. **Reception of the magic object:** the magic object is given to the hero.
9. **Combat:** hero and villain come into conflict.
10. **Victory:** the villain is defeated.
11. **Reparation:** initial hurt or lack is repaired.
12. **Wedding:** hero marries and ascends the throne.

Students were asked to work in pairs following the twelve functions and create a fairy tale being careful, of course, not to include other functions. This activity was very well accepted by the students who really used their imagination and excitement to write a fairy tale. It enabled students to develop their writing skills paying careful attention to vocabulary and verb tenses because one of the problems that students face while writing their compositions is that they always mix present tense with past tense. While they were writing their stories, I assumed the

¹² VLADIMIR, Propp. *Morphology of the Folk Tale*. op. cit.

role of instructor checking their writings and helping them correct their own mistakes when necessary. The following text (7) is an example of a fairy tale called Newland written by two students who followed the twelve functions:

Newland

(7) **Initial Situation:**¹³ During the Middle Ages, there was in the heart of Europe a little kingdom located between high mountains called Newland. This place was quiet, beautiful and crossed by rivers. It had a good climate and its land was excellent for apple plantation. People who lived there loved the kingdom because of its peacefulness.

1. Harm: In this kingdom, King Idea was suffering with a terrible monster. Ruffian was an invincible and big monster and had gnomes as secretaries and warriors. In Newland everybody was worried and horrified with the beast and its partners. The King was worried because Ruffian was eating the animals, destroying the forest, and killing people.

2. Lack: So King Idea wrote some pamphlets promising the hand of his sweet daughter Venus and a position in the court of Minister of Defense for the man who killed the monster.

3. Mediation: Zed, a humble worker, knew about the King's promise.

4. Start of Counter- action: He picked up his sword and decided to kill the monster.

5. Departure: He went to the mountains. There Zed spent many days trying to find the beast

6. First function of Donor: At a certain night, our hero Zed heard busses coming out from the caverns. They were gnomes. Zed fought and killed many of them. Zed was also hurt by one of them, though. At the cavern, Zed wounded and tired met an old man who gave him a magic golden sword which would help him kill the monster if he had the courage to defeat a dragon of four eyes called Evil the Great.

7. Reaction of the Hero: Suddenly this old nice man became the dragon. They fought for about an hour and Zed bravely defeated the horrible dragon.

8. Reception of the magic object: Zed received his magic sword and went after Ruffian.

9. Combat: One hour later, Zed arrived at Ruffian's cavern. They fought a lot. It was difficult to kill the monster because sometimes he became invisible.

10. Victory: Finally, Zed with his magic sword cut off Ruffian's head and took it to the King. His gnomes and secretaries ran away from the kingdom.

11. Reparation: Newland was again a peaceful and nice place to live.

12. Wedding: A few months later, there was a beautiful party to celebrate Zed and Venus' marriage. The King also gave him the job as the Minister of Defense of the kingdom. Zed and Venus and the kingdom lived happily forever and ever.

¹³ The functions are explicitly written in (7) for clarity. Students' text appeared as a unit.

The students enjoyed the opportunity they had to create sophisticated and vivid stories observing the literary elements which had been previously taught such as plot, characters, setting, point-of-view, imagery, mood, etc. These steps were also taken into consideration when they were writing their stories. They also had the chance to use their background knowledge to compose their stories with some characters that are from the Amazon legends such as *Curupira*, *Iara*, *Boto*, *Mãe-d'água*.¹⁴ With this activity, students became more personally involved with their writing process because it made them feel more independent and more motivated to write.

4. Conclusion

One of the things I like most about using poems and fairy tales in my English classroom is that it is possible to create plenty of opportunities for personalization. In other words, students have a lot to say and a lot to communicate because they are writing about their own experiences and feelings. They are motivated and engaged in writing their first or second poem or their first fairy tale in English making our classes memorable. These writing activities add enjoyment to language learning and as we have seen in the activities presented here, working with these pieces in class is an excellent vehicle for practicing a particular grammar structure because it will be more deeply internalized, and besides that, teachers will give an opportunity for students to show their feelings and their enthusiasm for literature.

If we teachers show our excitement in preparing activities to work in our classes, our students will respond to it positively because enthusiasm and motivation are contagious. Teachers can create a variety of writing activities to help students develop their writing skills. For this reason, literature can help students make language learning more enjoyable and more productive because

¹⁴ *Curupira* is a boy who defends the Amazon forest. *Iara* is a beautiful woman who lives in the rivers of the Amazon. *Boto* is a very elegant man who wears white clothes, and *Mãe-d'água* is a very beautiful mermaid.

they will be writing their own pieces of literature. I agree with Nelly Zafeiriadou¹⁵ that declares that “the teaching of literature in the language classroom which aims to develop skills in critical and creative thinking contributes to the students’ personal growth and fosters their autonomy first as language learners and then as individuals.” Using literature to teach writing in the language classroom generates creativity among the students and they are encouraged to use it imaginatively, stimulating their interest and motivation in learning a foreign language and consequently increasing their love for literature. In terms of pedagogy, the benefits of using literature to teach the four skills in a language class are enormous. For this reason, the ideas mentioned on this paper should motivate teachers to prepare their activities, taking into consideration that literature is also a tool to use as a focus in the teaching context. I believe that working with poems, fairy tales, short stories, plays or novels will only instill in the learners a love for literature stimulating them to enjoy it even outside the classroom.

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Notes:

I wish to express my warmest thanks to Prof. Ph.D. Walkyria Magno e Silva who so graciously shared her knowledge with me. I also extend my gratitude to my students, fellow literature lovers, who made this study possible.

¹⁵ ZAFEIRIADOU, Nelly. On Literature in the EFL classroom. *TESOL Greece Newspaper*, July/Sept 2001. In: www.developingteacher.com/articles_tchtrainig/lit1_nelly.htm. Accessed on: 10/25/ 2006.

