Making a Case for Creative Writing in Academic English Programs

by Patrick T. Randolph
Independent Researcher, Freelance Speaker and Writer

I. Introduction

A Parable of the Creative Child

There once came onto this earth a child with a great love for life and a passion to create. One early summer day, she closed her eyes and cupped her small hands together; she hoped, prayed, and asked for a caterpillar to appear…and when she opened her eyes and unfolded her fingers, a caterpillar wiggled on the tender skin in the palm of her hand. And the child smiled. She cupped her hands together again and closed her eyes; she hoped, prayed, and imagined a butterfly in her hands. When she released each finger, there—waltzing against the air with its iridescent indigo wings—sat her butterfly. The child's eyes danced, welcoming this new life and creation. Then the child smiled again and winked a wink of winks—and the butterfly understood. Within moments, the two were flying above and below the clouds, above and below the trees on that early summer day. Yes, there once was a child who came onto this earth.

To you, the reader, who now holds this article in your hands or views it on your screen, I would like you to consider the possibility that you are the creative child in the parable. You have the passion, the power, the magic, and the love inside your heart and mind to make life beautiful—for you, your students, and the world. You have the opportunity to revolutionize English language learning by introducing more creative writing to your students and helping them to become better thinkers, writers, and observers of the simple yet profound and meaningful moments of their lives.

II. The Case for Creative Writing—A Discussion in Four Arguments

So, why creative writing? What does it offer and what can it accomplish that academic and technical writing cannot? What is so special about it, and why should English language programs across the globe be promoting it as an essential skill like reading, grammar, speaking, and listening?

The answers to these questions may appear somewhat controversial; they call into question the status quo and suggest that English language programs should not focus solely on academic and technical writing, at least not in the basic, intermediate, and low advanced writing courses. To show, then, what creative writing has to offer, let us take a look at four arguments to shed light on why it ought to have a special place in the English language curriculum.

1. Creative Writing Uses the Students' Personhood as the Source for Writing Material

Academic and technical writing require English language learners (ELLs) to write about various topics specific to the course they are taking or related to the topics generated in their textbooks (Randolph, 2012). These are most often interesting topics, like the pros and cons of performance-

enhancing drugs, immigration reform, or new policies in education. The topics, however, have little to do with the majority of the students' personal backgrounds or interests. One major issue that my own students have experienced is that while studying at basic or intermediate levels, they are asked to write about concepts that are very foreign to what they know. There is often no real connection between the material and who they are as individuals. In addition, the students are asked to write about the topics in their nonnative language. This merely complicates matters, causing frustration and a fear of academic writing (Randolph, 2012; Urbanski, 2006).

Creative writing, by contrast, focuses on and uses the language learners' personhood as the source for the writing material. Whether it is poetry or prose, students tap directly into what they know based on their personal histories, memories, feelings, and experiences to think and write about their topics. This can be a direct connection to a personal experience, like recalling the smells in their grandma's kitchen, or it can be an indirect but meaningful connection in which students use their imagination, like writing about being a cat in a small Turkish village. The stories are always generated from what makes the students' personhood. The creative writing experience is consequently very personal and gives the ELLs a sense of ownership in both the process and the product. The writer's golden rule of "write about what you know and are interested in" is at the core of creative writing.

2. Creative Writing Promotes Flexibility in Skill and Thought

Academic and technical writing, although very important and useful, are frequently contrived, template driven, forced, limiting, and highly formulaic (Randolph, 2012). In terms of developing strong writing skills and training the mind to be flexible and insightful, it seems that these kinds of writing often do the exact opposite. Nash (2004), a professor in the College of Education and Social Services at the University of Vermont with more than 40 years of teaching experience, summarizes different kinds of academic writings as "a matter of understanding how to fit some new pieces of the knowledge puzzle into the old research templates; a matter, if you will, of knowing how to pour new research wine into the same old format bottles" (pp. 54–55).

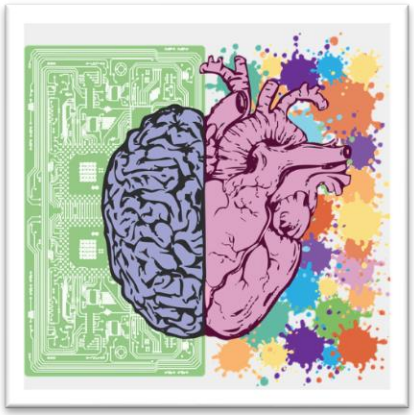
Zinsser (2001) rightly claims, “You learn to write by writing. It’s a truism, but what makes it a truism is that it’s true” (p. 49). For our ELLs, however, I would add creative writing to the mix: You learn to write by practicing creative writing. To promote growth in thought and development in the writing process and to help students become more flexible in how and what they write, there is no better tool than creative writing. This is why English language programs need to consider revolutionizing their outdated and rather ineffective ways and incorporating creative writing-based activities and methods into their basic through low-advanced writing curricula (Fanselow, 2014; Hecq, 2015; Immordino-Yang, 2016).

There is no template for creative writing. That said, one could argue that some poetry is limited to certain patterns and structures (e.g., “breath poems,” tanka, or sonnets) or that there is a basic structure for short stories that requires a story arc and character development. The content, however, that ELLs work with is still generated from their memories, experiences, and observations. The impact of this content is supported by Eagleman’s (2015) research in neuroscience. He shows that “the meaning of something to you is all about your webs of associations, based on the whole history of your life experiences” (p. 33).

The fact that creative writing has multiple genres also gives ELLs an opportunity to work on many kinds of writing and writing skills. Within the basic genres of poetry, prose, dialogue, and creative nonfiction, there are a myriad of styles, forms, and skills that can help ELLs broaden their understanding of what writing is all about while simultaneously making them better writers. For example, writing “breath poems” teaches ELLs the difference between using weak and strong lexical items; creating short stories enhances the ELLs’ understanding of detail in descriptions and explanations; developing dialogue helps in creating an authentic tone; and creative nonfiction blends creativity with facts, allowing students to craft a solid sense of accuracy in the details and establish believable content. And ultimately, the more ELLs do creative writing, the more they write and learn about themselves, their topics, and their skills.

Research in neuroscience (Eagleman, 2011; Jensen, 2008; Medina, 2009; Ratey, 2002; Sousa, 2011; Willis, 2006) consistently points to the need for the brain to be flexible and to look at reality from multiple perspectives if it is to continue to acquire new skills and learn various kinds of information. Granted, this can be done with different types of academic writing, but only after the students have developed their skills at a high enough level. Because creative writing pushes students of all levels to think in unique ways, it is an extremely effective medium to help foster their critical thinking as well as develop their various skills in the writing process.

3. Creative Writing Works with Emotions and the Tangible World



Another argument for using creative writing is that it is very natural for the cognitive processes to incorporate emotions while learning skills and information.

> Yes, rational thought and logical reasoning do exist, although hardly ever truly devoid of emotion, but they cannot be recruited appropriately and usefully in the real world without emotion. Emotions help to direct our reasoning into the sector of knowledge that is relevant to the current situation or problem. (Immordino-Yang, 2016, p. 37)

To ask basic to low advanced ELLs to analyze recent theories in quantum physics or executive policies at the state level of government, critique Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, or summarize and respond to alternative methods of transportation is vastly different from having them choose emotionally heightened events in their lives and write a reflective essay, poem, or piece of flash fiction about them. The difference is simple—the former writing topics are very abstract in nature while the latter are based on emotions and are concrete and tangible.

Having students write about abstract ideas or concepts that they have not emotionally embraced or experienced is indeed setting many students up to fail. "People don't come preassembled, but are glued together by life" (LeDoux, 2003, p. 3). These life experiences are encoded, stored, and even recalled by the power of our emotions, which "are central to the functions of the brain and to the life of the mind" (Davidson & Begley, 2013, p. xi). It is only logical, then, that we help our students become solid writers by using a medium that is based in the concrete world and filled with helpful learning devices like emotions. In fact, over the past 24 years, my students who have done creative writing have often mentioned that this type of writing fills them with a sense of emotion that other kinds of writing don't. There is an element of joy inherent in producing these types of writings—a topic with which I will conclude my arguments for using creative writing.

4. Creative Writing Is Fun!

"Argumentative writing is new to me, I'm learning a lot from it! Although my favorite is still creative writing…"

—A former student

At the beginning of each semester, I ask my students to consider doing one thing that will add meaning to both the class and their lives, and that is, "Make writing your friend and learn to walk hand in hand with Her." I explain that they don't necessarily have to pledge their heart to Her, but if they can, I urge my students to befriend Her and have fun with Her presence. And, if they do, life will be ever so sweet.

In Plato's *Republic*[1] (trans. Sterling & Scott, 537a), Socrates makes a claim about education that all writing teachers ought to embrace. In Book VII of this influential work, the dialogue centers around the finer points of how the youth should be taught, and the argument is made that "we must make learning fun." Writing can be a burden, a chore, a difficult and daunting task. It can, however, also be great fun, enjoyable, and something that inspires our students to learn about a vast number of topics and develop as writers themselves. Creative writing is the catalyst for this positive adventure by making learning fun, which in turn makes the act of writing fun.

Csikszentmihalyi (2013) has studied the phenomenon of creativity and the human condition for decades. In his book, *Creativity: The Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, he highlights the essence of what inspires creative individuals. What he has found is that

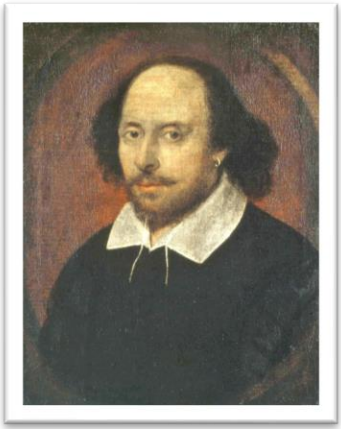
> [c]reative persons differ from one another in a variety of ways, but in one respect they are unanimous: They all love what they do. It is not the hope of achieving fame or making money that drives them; rather, it is the opportunity to do the work that they enjoy doing. (p. 107)

[1] This is a brilliant example of philosophical creative writing.

When I teach the many wonderful activities related to creative writing, I notice that my students truly enjoy developing characters and plots that are born out of their own ideas and experiences. They like sharing these in written form because they are genuinely connected to the creative process and the work itself. The end result of all of this is "they all love what they do" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013, p. 107).

Perhaps one of the most amazing realities of creative writing is that students from across all disciplines can do it, and they can do it very well. Not all biology majors want to write about concepts or issues in civil engineering, and not all civil engineering students can necessarily write comfortably or confidently about topics in biology. But, students in both biology and civil engineering and students from all other disciplines can write meaningful poetry and engaging short stories. Creative writing is an activity that all can do and all can enjoy. And this is why we should incorporate more of it in our English language classrooms.

III. Concluding Remarks



I have claimed that academic and technical writing, although very important, are limited in nature (Nash, 2004; Randolph, 2012). True, they are essential, but they ought not to comprise the entire foundation of English language instruction (Fanselow, 2014). Creative writing, on the other hand, teaches ELLs at all levels through relying on their own personal resources to develop a strong sense of confidence, control, and comfort in their writing skills. Through the medium of creative writing, ELLs learn to express their ideas in a natural way and organize their thoughts to create a genuine feeling or situation in a poem, fable, dialogue, or piece of short fiction.

At the beginning of this article, I asked you to consider or imagine yourself to be the inspirational child in the parable—that child with a "great love for life and a passion to create." I want you to entertain such an idea and think about how you can help shake the dust off of our writing departments and help make writing classes more beneficial and inspirational for our students. Through using the various concepts in creative writing, I hope everyone can find the magic of creativity and develop the joy of writing about the unique moments and wonders of their lives. To help you get started, I have included two creative writing activities as addenda to this article.

Addendum I

Two-Perspective Poetry
Patrick T. Randolph

SAMPLE WORK

Gable

On that sunny Sunday
In our new town,
I felt your heartbeat
with my hands,

It was that very moment
That you joined our family.

We love how furry you are—
How protective, how sweet—
How funny—
And despite your epic size,
How gentle you can be.

—Gamze Randolph

Gable

Gable is cute
And furry!

I love him.

I like the way
He hides—and protects us!

He is the guard of
Our house!

—Aylene N. Randolph

Levels	All
Aims	Participate in both pair and individual work Investigate multiple perspectives
Class Time	2 (50-minute) class periods
Preparation Time	5–10 minutes
Resources	Projector or Doc Cam Selected image Student cell phones; camera

THE RATIONALE FOR & SUMMARY OF THE ACTIVITY

Two-Perspective Poetry is a fun activity that allows students to pair up and work together while simultaneously allowing them to observe and write their own poems. After completing their poetry, they will see how similar or how different their perspectives and insights are regarding the same subject. In addition to writing the poems, the students can also write reflections about the similarities or differences of their unique perspectives.

PROCEDURE

Day 1

1. First, project a few interesting images on a screen or draw them on the board (e.g., a handsome tiger staring into the camera).

2. Ask the students to think about what it is they see. Also inquire about how it makes them feel and have them reflect on what senses or emotions are elicited and why.

3. Have them write down a few notes in response to the questions and then share these with a partner.

4. Ask for a few volunteers to share their answers with the class. This point in the activity will be of great interest because the students will see how many different perspectives there can be on the same subject. Ask about the reasons why there are different impressions, emotions, senses, and perspectives.

Day 2

5. Have the students pair up. Explain that they are to go outside and take a photo with their phones/cameras of a subject that they are both interested in. This could be an animal, a plant, a person, or a building. Limit this to 10–15 minutes.

6. Students return to the classroom. Give them directions for writing a short, 5- to 10-line

poem about their common subject's appearance, how it feels, or how it makes them feel.

7. When they are done, the partners read their poems to each other and then write down the similarities and differences between the two poems.

8. If time permits, select a few volunteers to read their poems to the class, and then discuss the interesting perspectives on the subject as a group.

9. Consider assigning homework, such as the following:
   a. Have the students take pictures of another pairs' "two-perspective" poems.
   b. Assign each student to write a paragraph about the similarities and differences of the two poems.

Addendum II

Turning Lexical Items into Word-People Poems
Patrick T. Randolph

SAMPLE WORK

Ms. Meticulous

Before leaving for work,
She checks her bedroom mirror to make sure
Every hair on her head is in perfect position.
She examines her lipstick; yes—
The deep red hue is just right.

Ms. Meticulous looks over her blue dress,
Not a wrinkle in sight; her shoes
Twinkling with a dance of sunshine.

She closes her front door, wiggles
The handle to confirm it is locked.

Ms. Meticulous finally walks to work—
The epitome of care and detailed precision
Now strolling down this spring-welcoming street!

—Patrick T. Randolph

Levels	Intermediate to Advanced
Aims	Review vocabulary Acquire an intimate feeling for words Create fun free verse Look at lexical items in a new, refreshing light
Class Time	3 (50-minute) class periods
Preparation Time	10–15 minutes
Resources	List of vocabulary items Sample poem Poem rubric (Appendix)

THE RATIONALE FOR & SUMMARY OF THE ACTIVITY

Research in education and neuroscience (Jensen, 2008; Randolph, 2014; Willis, 2006) continues to demonstrate how important it is to repeat the learned material, connect emotions to the learning process, personalize the information, and develop an ownership of the content. My creation of "word-people poems" incorporates and fosters all four of the aforesaid elements as they help English language learners (1) repeat the meaning and use of the lexical items; (2) develop an emotional connection to the content; (3) personalize the terms through the poetic narrative; and (4) ultimately own each term by using it in a unique and humanistic way. By writing word-people poems, English language learners not only personify the lexical items but also turn each English term into a friend or acquaintance, which significantly deepens their understanding and relationship with the English language and its lexical culture—rich in words and their various connotations.

THE PROCEDURE

Day 1

1. Have your students pair up and review a list of recently learned vocabulary by quizzing each other (10–12 is a good number of items). Each member of the pair should take turns asking for the definition, the part of speech, and an original example sentence for each term.

2. Next, as a class, choose one lexical item (e.g., *meticulous*, *miraculous*, or *walk on air*) from the list. Write this item on the board. Then, ask the students to think of the item as if it were a person. That is, if *meticulous* were a person, what would he or she look like and how would he or she act?

   Give the students about 2–3 minutes to determine the lexical item's gender, physical characteristics, personality traits, and possible career, hobbies, favorite foods, films, and sports. For example, "Ms. Meticulous is an attractive, tall, thin, accountant who lives with her family in a small cottage in a safe, clean village." Write these on the board for everyone to see.

3. Explain that students will now assign as many traits to the words on the list as they can. The amount of time spent on this will depend on the length of the list.

4. Next, have each student choose a different term and tell their partner about its personhood in as much detail as they can. Giving the students the opportunity to create an "oral character sketch" (Randolph, 2014, p. 2) helps them organize their thoughts and develop their creativity before they start to write their poems.

Day 2

5. Tell the students that they will now write a poem in free verse about their word-person. To help them with this, it is recommended that you first show the class your own word-poem or use the sample poem from this activity.

6. Give the students 15–20 minutes to write the first draft of their free verse. Monitor the activity and offer the students help.

7. It is important to point out that all the information, images, and related words used in the poem should essentially help define or shed light on the definition or meaning of the word-person. For example, being an accountant would be the perfect career for Ms. Meticulous because an accountant must be precise with numbers and finances.

8. As homework, ask the students to complete the second draft of their poems.

Day 3

9. In the class that follows, have the students read their poems in small groups of three or four. Explain to the poets that they need to read their work twice. The first time, the audience should just listen for fun. The second time, they should rate the poem using the short poem analysis provided below.

Poem Analysis	
1. What word, phrase, or idiom is the poem about?	
2. * How well is the lexical item described?	3 2 1
3. Did the poet create a rich image of the character?	Yes No
4. What image was your favorite?	
5. Draw a picture of the character described in the poem.	

* Rating scale: Very well (3); well (2); needs work (1)

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Correspondence concerning this article can be addressed to patricktrandolph@gmail.com.

PATRICK T. RANDOLPH has received two "Best of TESOL Affiliates" awards for his presentations on his own contributions to vocabulary pedagogy (2015) and his seminar on preventing plagiarism (2018). He has also recently received two "Best of CoTESOL Awards" for his 2017 presentation on Observation Journals and his 2018 talk on Creative Writing. Randolph specializes in vocabulary acquisition, creative and academic writing, speech, and debate. He has created a number of brain-based learning activities for the language skills that he teaches, and he continues to research current topics in neuroscience, especially studies related to exercise and learning, memory, and mirror neurons. Randolph has also been involved as a volunteer with brain-imaging experiments at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He lives with his wife, Gamze; daughter, Aylene; and cat, Gable, in Lincoln, NE.

The photo of Gable the cat is by Patrick T. Randolph. All other images are from www.pixabay.com.

Note: A version of this article will appear in the author's forthcoming book,
New Ways in Teaching With Creative Writing, TESOL Press.