

THE TEACHER'S TASK IN THE TEACHING OF CREATIVE WRITING IN A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This paper discusses the teaching of creative writing in the context of Communicative Language teaching. Foreign language teaching methodology has passed through a lot of modernization and innovation. The innovation in communicative language teaching lies in the teaching of language as tool for communication, as opposed to acquisition of grammatical rules. The importance of creative writing is discussed. The essential elements a writing teacher should take into consideration in helping the student-writer acquire the rudiments of good writing were also examined.

Introduction

Communication could broadly be defined as "the sharing of experience". Tubbs and Moss (1987:6) note that to some extent all living organisms can be said to share experience, and thereby do communicate'. However, the uniqueness of human communication lies in the ability of human beings to create and use symbols to communicate. It is this singular ability to use symbols that enables human beings to "share experiences indirectly and vicariously" (Goyer, 1990). The process of communication involves the use of shared codes of verbal or non-verbal symbols to transmit or transfer information, beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, opinions between two or more individuals. These codes or symbols could take the form of words, pictures, images and meanings. The transference of information or messages does not in itself constitute communication. The cycle of communication can only be completed when meaning is created or established between the individuals involved. It is therefore a two-way street. Banjo and Bisong (1985:7) observe that; There are basically two ways of using language to communicate meaning: by speaking and by writing. Of these two ways, speaking is basic and writing is derived from it. Language is not just the internalization of rules. It is important only to the extent that it communicates. That is why today communicative competence has superseded linguistic competence in importance in foreign language teaching. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is an innovation in foreign language teaching borne out of recent research and experience of language teachers, linguists, sociolinguists and curriculum designers (Obi, 1996). Kim (1994:7) asserts that: The linguist only preoccupies himself with scientific description of a language, a code or system of signs while limiting to the minimum recourse to meaning. The student who is learning a foreign language does not have the same pre-occupations; the only thing that matters to him is the meaning. Either he tries to express himself: in this case what is important to him is to communicate meaning in some new forms; or he seeks to understand and in this case he seeks to extract some meaning from a sequence of foreign forms.(Translation from French).

In a programme of communicative competence the learner learns something useful to his needs. The Movement for Communicative Competence has had a high level of success in Europe with these programmes that take into consideration the functional nature of foreign language learning.

Writing is one of the basic forms of language. It is in fact the most advanced form of language in communication. One can write for various purposes but the bottom-line of all writing purposes is for communication - communicating one's ideas and thoughts to others.

Creative Writing

What does it mean to create? The word "create" derives from a Latin word, CRBARE. To create, according to Kirkpatrick (1983), **Chamber's Twentieth Century Dictionary**, means "to bring into being or form out of nothing; to bring into being out of the force of imagination". The word "imagination" in this dictionary definition is important and suits our purpose in this paper. Creative writing therefore is that kind of writing that pertains to, or shows, imagination - usually original, imaginative writing.

Forms of creative writing are; the novel, short story, autobiography, poetry, children's story books, drama, radio and television scripts. All these are products of imagination. Creative works are meant to be enjoyed and appreciated; they are meant to communicate certain messages directly or indirectly, by design or inadvertence.

Literary authorities believe that everyone has the ability to create. We are all born with a gift of language. The resources of understanding, imagination and wit are available for the creative business. Sweeney (1979) feels that:

sometimes people are not aware that they possess this power; sometimes and more commonly, they have some kind of inkling to it, but their time is so taken up with the sheer drudgery of making a living . . . (that) there is Hide or no room in (hem for the world of the imagination and creative power.

Many a lime the barrier between some people and creative writing is that wedged by their inability to set their thought down on paper. To learn to write is to write. Writing is habit and it has to be cultivated. One learns through practice, through trial and error. The body of knowledge known as literature is the result of creative writing.

What to Write

What does one write about in creative writing? The point has been made earlier that creative writing is borne out of imagination. Sweeney (1979) puts it this way:

literature and art generally are images of life, not life itself. They are a distancing of (he dynamic of life in masks.

It is therefore the ideas, thoughts and reflections of a writer that he writes down either to inform or educate or entertain or, in fact, all three purposes at the same time. What is written may be borne out of hard reflection, out of inspiration, out of sheer imagination or out of the general experiences of life.

The intention of writing is to inform and persuade others. A writer also learns in the process of writing because he has an opportunity to fill the gap in his information, to clear all confusions he had, A good piece of writing is beneficial both to the writer and to the reader.

Can Creative Writing be Taught?

The question often arises as to whether the art of creative writing is learnt or is inborn. One makes bold to say that both inert and environmental factors count. It has earlier been posited that everyone has an inert capacity to create. To Jones (1974), "there is something of a poet in all of us". He says that everyone has feelings, and in his equation "FEELING + (controlled) SPEECH = POETRY". This power to create is either exploited or left untapped due to various reasons. The beginning of writing creative work is to begin to write. The saying that, "practice makes perfect" is true in this regard. Until one takes the bold step to start to write one can really never take off. Many a man has conjectured many a topic, constructed the ideas in their dreams but never really took the most decisive step of putting down the ideas on paper.

Hans Guth has worked extensively on writing courses for young writers. The aim of writing courses is to help the student learn to use language more effectively for communicating his ideas. Many a time a student does not really know his potentials. He is aided to discover what he knows and how much more he can learn. This learning takes place in the process of thinking about the subject matter which he intends to write about. The writer wants to make a contribution in the reader's knowledge, to make an input in the reader's thinking and action.

The Teacher's Task

The task of the teacher therefore is to help the young writer understand the rewards of writing, the steps to take in writing, and actual writing challenges; that is, exposing him to a variety of topics for practice. These range from personal experiences shared (memories, thought and feelings), biographies,

interviews etc.

Essential Elements in Creative Writing Teaching

It is important for the potential writer to realise that the main ingredients of writing are **words, ideas and images** that are put together in such a harmonious way as to convey meaning. This looks simplistic but it could be difficult sometimes to get words - **appropriate words**. It would rather be prudent to set down the ideas in the words that first come to mind without undue worry about correctness, although correctness is very important. The advantage of writing over speech is that the arrangement of words, ideas, sentences and paragraphs in written communication can always be revisited and re-arranged. On the other hand, words once spoken, have been spoken and recorded in the memory of the hearer. So after taking down notes, a draft is written. The writing may go through many rewrites in response to feedbacks received, additional information or input from other people. The final write-up passes through the crucible of re-writing and reshaping.

Vocabulary is very important in writing. It is the building blocks in speech and writing (Guth, 1975). One cannot communicate without words that convey exact meaning. Words help us to think. The thinking is as clear or as muddled up as are the words. The potential writer must be aware of this and should train in vocabulary acquisition.

In using words the writer must bear in mind that **economy of words** is at the heart of good, effective writing. Says White (1987) in **Elements of Styles**:

A sentence should contain no unnecessary word paragraphs, no unnecessary sentences for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine, no unnecessary parts.

This does not mean, however that a piece of writing should be dry, empty and lacking in details. Rather it only means that "every word tells". The importance of economy of words is that the reader gets maximum information and minimum boredom and ambiguity.

Another important quality of good writing is its **simplicity**. There is the need to avoid high-flown, pompous, complex language. This does not mean using monotonous, drab, meaningless sentences - what Achebe's creation in **No Longer at Ease** would call "is and was". The appropriateness in the choice of language is determined by the target audience, the subject matter or theme. Each subject matter has its own vocabulary, register level and syntactic peculiarities.

Clarity is another important quality of good and effective writing. Whatever has to be said must be said clearly. Writing is more carefully worked out and more lasting than casual talk. While the spoken word can immediately be explained or amplified or even retracted, the written word has to stand on its own. The tone of the writing must indicate that the subject matter and the reader are taken seriously.

Writing is a persuasion by use of information and explanation. The writer wants to sound convincing, to attempt to change attitudes and behaviour of the reader, to motivate him, and he can only do this in a clear manner that can be understood. Persuasive writers know the power of words - how to use words to arouse and steer the reader's emotions in the desired direction. The writer therefore has to know very well and be conscious of his audience and must respond to the needs and respect the limitations of his readers.

Organisation Once the ideas are assembled either through inspiration, incidental experience, hard reflection etc. the medium and audience are determined, the work has to be organised in a logical order so as to make the desired impact. The sentences grow into paragraphs, and paragraphs flow in a logical sequence with unity of language and thought and a coherent flow of ideas.

In addition to the ability to reason and organise the material in a logical sense, the potential writer must also have a good grounding in the oral skills. Some mechanical errors of grammar and usage do arise from poor pronunciation and understanding of words. The mechanics of language, the basic points of grammar and acceptable language usage are all put to use to achieve efficient, coherent, clear and fine writing (Banjo & Bisong, 1985).

At the risk of sounding a bit contradictory one hastens to advise along with authorities in creative writing that there should be no undue worry about correctness to the detriment of fluent expression and

development of personal original style. The quest for correctness should not be allowed to hinder **originality of thought and expression**. Allowances should always be made for false starts and second thoughts. There is always time for revision, rewriting and rethinking. In all things the logical arrangement of facts and ideas should be paramount especially for beginner writers.

It should be noted that everyone does not think alike, feel alike, go through or use the same experiences. So there should always be some kind of originality in creative writing.

Opportunities for writing should be seized whenever they occur. It is easier to write on incidents within one's experiences than to write on abstract ones where one has not been personally involved. Subjects that arouse the writer's interest, curiosity, enthusiasm or even indignation are best tackled. Even in assigned topics the writer's best bet is to find a personal angle or connection to it, relating them to his experience or observation. A good writer is, of course, a good observer, one who is able to notice things.

The subject matter should be a realistic one, not a highly ambitious one which the potential writer cannot effectively handle.

Reading These hints would be incomplete without discussing the important role of reading in the whole process of creative writing. According to Banjo and Bisong (1985):

the best way of learning to write effectively is by reading widely and noticing what good writers do with the language. Then of course one must also practise writing. A good writer is often a good reader and a good listener too. Much could be gathered by

talking to people about your subject matter. Sweeney (1979:3) points out that:

any incursion into literature as one of the great art forms of mankind can be looked upon as a visit to another country. There one acquires more experiences to sharpen one's focus when writing.

Summary And Conclusion

There is a saying that no one goes to the farm and fails to see work to do. The hindrance is somewhere at home. The "reluctant-writer" syndrome makes the writer put off the work till next time until it is late. It is the task of the writing teacher to encourage the student-writer to recognise that he, like anyone else, enjoys the essential attributes of a writer - those of native talent and life's experiences. It is important to recognise the rewards of writing as enumerated by Hans Gum (1989) thus:

- It makes one go beyond the superficial first impression to explore and think a subject matter through. It is a process of discovery by which one moves beyond prejudice and hearsay to see for himself.
- Writing is an opportunity to express oneself and to state one's own point of view-an exercise that could be satisfying and ego-boosting.
- It gives an opportunity to influence others, create an impression, correct a misunderstanding or set a record straight, or proffer a solution to a problem.

In writing courses therefore, models should be provided for student writers. These serve as an inspiration, broaden their knowledge and understanding of people and ideas. They help to sharpen students' thinking and enable them to relish good writing and the urge to write.

Students' awareness of the complexity of issues is nurtured through exposure to reading, analysis and discussion. By exposure to a variety of writing assignments in response to reading they get to learn the rudiments of composing mature writing. The writing process is a process of thinking, reading, discussing, writing and rewriting.

More than other teachers, writing teachers come to know their students as people with personalities, agendas, and loyalties of their own.

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