Abstract

In order to teach students to process information creatively, teachers encourage them to create, invent, discover, explore, imagine and suppose. However, to a large extent, creativity is not just a matter of thinking in a certain way, but rather it is an attitude toward life (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995, 1996). Creative people are creative, in large part, because they have decided to be creative (Sternberg, 2000). What are the decisions that underlie creative thinking? This paper starts with this question and then proceeds to why poetry is chosen to employ creative thinking skills and how a poem can be taught through a combination of creative thinking skills and an aesthetic reading by a reader response theory advocated by Rosenblatt and it aims to show how Rosenblatt and Strenberg’s ideas are combined to tackle the issue of creativity through poetry in ELT classes.

Keywords: creativity, socio-constructivism, poetry, language teaching

POETRY

Today’s teachers may be intuitively aware that poetry has much more to offer, but, perhaps because of negative experiences in their own school life, they have difficulty and they show reluctance to use poetry in classes for their pupils, due to the anxiety and worry poetry evokes for them. If “the teacher is the key to the delivery of the curriculum and the teacher’s own experiences, actions and attitudes will exert their own influence” (Wade and Sidaway, 1990, p. 75), then it would seem that any framework for helping teachers to teach poetry must acknowledge teachers’ feelings, attitude and experiences about poetry, and encourage them to engage with poetry in a positive and non-threatening way. This study is aimed to encourage teachers to develop their understanding of poetry to enhance creative thinking skills in the classroom.

Poems pose a challenging cognitive task. Readers must first have a basic understanding of a concept or emotion and then transform that understanding into meaningful creative expression by exploring and distilling complex ideas. Understanding a poem involves the construction of meaning, enabling its writer to see new possibilities. The rhythm and structure of poetry communicate far more than simply presenting information; the construction of imagery and choice of specific words is as meaningful as the content (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

Poetry can fulfill the primary objectives identified by McGovern and Hogshead (1990) as reasons for assigning writing: enhancing writing skills, promoting learning, and fostering analytic and creative thinking and problem solving. Discussing a poem is an exercise in problem finding, a skill essential to creative work in both the arts and the sciences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Nickerson, 1999). Elaborating on an idea through the process of forming connections and relationships enhances learning and critical thinking (Halpern, 1998). Postman and Weingartner (1969) suggest that traditional education is too often a process of “Guess what I’m thinking” in which students try to supply “The Right Answer” (p. 20), whatever they think the teacher wants to hear. In contrast, there is no single correct way to discuss a poem. In the process of encoding, the writer discovers and analyses form, content, and expression. Creative thinking involves breaking typical patterns of thinking to perceive in a fresh way (Amabile, 1989), to try something different, and to take an intellectual risk (Nickerson, 1999). Not only does a poem present a cognitive challenge for its writer, it also stimulates critical thinking in its audience. Understanding and appreciating a creative work is itself a creative act (May, 1975). Poetry often contains unconventional language or unusual treatment of a topic. Surprise becomes a catalyst for critical thinking as the audience works to resolve subsequent feelings of disequilibrium (Halonen, 1995).
CREATIVITY

Despite its importance, creativity has been one of the orphans in language teaching or literature teaching because of the challenges inherent in defining and measuring it. Creativity is an elusive concept; the criteria used to measure creativity sometimes seem to trivialize it (Sternberg & Lubart, 1999, p.4). Traditionally, laboratory investigations of creativity asked research participants to solve structured problems. In contrast, real-world creativity involves the discovery of an idea or problem, not simply solving a presented problem (Kay, 1994; Nickerson, 1999). Recently, the approaches and methods in language learning have called for greater emphasis on building strengths, including creativity, and fostering these skills (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). When people are creating, they feel more engaged and live more fully than at other times, and the products of their creative work enrich their own and other peoples’ lives (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Although virtually everyone of normal intelligence has the capacity for creativity, few people achieve anywhere near their creative potential. Three intellectual skills are especially important to creativity: (a) synthetic ability, seeing problems in new ways and demonstrating unconventional thinking; (b) analytic ability, deciding which ideas are worth pursuing; and (c) practical contextual ability, knowing how to effectively communicate ideas to others (Sternberg, 1986; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999).

Writing poetry makes use of all three of these intellectual skills, in both the writer composing the poem, and in the audience appreciating the writer’s synthesis, analysis, and communication. Students are often capable of more creativity than their teachers think, but assignments may not allow or encourage them to demonstrate creative thinking (Brent & Felder, 1992). Creative writing assignments give students experience in developing their voice in a way that exams and research papers cannot do (Elbow, 1998). When students write creatively, they see themselves as active writers and thinkers, fostering future creative experimentation. Furthermore, when educators teach and assess students in a way that values creativity, academic performance improves (Sternberg & Lubart, 1999). According to Sternberg (2003), creativity consists of a series of decisions: (a) deciding to be creative, (b) deciding how to be creative, and (c) putting the first two decisions into action. To maximize the likelihood that students will decide in favor of creativity, Sternberg recommends that teachers encourage and reward sensible intellectual risk-taking, model creativity, cross-fertilize ideas across academic disciplines, and encourage students to imagine situations from other viewpoints.

SOCIO-CONSTRUCTIVISM

Research in cognitive science (Newman et al., 1989; Rogoff and Lave, 1984) has shown that everyday experience of the learners is the foundation upon which they construct an ‘intuitive understanding’ (Vosniadou, 1992, p. 349) of their cultural environment. This understanding can also be referred to as naive knowledge and could be considered by teachers as being unimportant. But, as Boekaerts (1992) argues, for high quality knowledge acquisition to take place it is extremely important to make use of the creative and critical thinking skills of the learners. Vosniadou (1992) shows that when ‘school knowledge’ contradicts experiential knowledge, children assign it to separate domains rather than extending and developing previous knowledge. It therefore remains separate from, rather than a part of, the restructuring that goes into appropriation.

It is well known that the theory of socio-constructivism can be applied to the teaching of many different subjects in the curriculum including foreign languages (Littledyke and Huxford, 1998). A more traditional view of construction of knowledge by mainstream educators has been that knowledge is constructed individually with little reference given to the surrounding environment. However, social constructivism sees personal constructs being developed in a social context, with particular emphasis in Western schooling on language as the main communicator of those experiences. Tobin puts it succinctly: “Social interactions using a shared language enable the teacher and learners to communicate and test the fit of their knowledge with others’ representations. When the fit reaches an acceptable level it is concluded that a consensus has been achieved, in the sense that personal constructions bear a family resemblance to the constructions of others with whom negotiation has occurred” (1998, p.195). It would seem that a methodology underpinned by such a theory could work well with the teaching and learning of poetry by considering the following tenets:
the social interaction is at the heart of teaching and learning;
existing knowledge is seen as important and that any new knowledge is linked to that;
teaching and learning is relevant to the culture and the community as a whole.

A teaching approach to poetry based on the socio-constructive view of learning is presented below (Cumming, 2007)

Orientation
Arousing students’ interest, imagination, creativity, emotion and intellect by engaging in poetic experiences that are easily accessible, e.g. reading and discussing a poem together on a subject that students can relate to.

Elicitation/structuring
Helping students to engage with poetry and with each other’s ideas by giving time for students to respond individually and corporately. This might involve periods of quiet meditation ‘thinking time’ followed by sharing of responses such as ideas, feelings and experiences that are stimulated by engaging with the poem.

Intervention/restructuring
Encouraging students to experiment and play with language through engaging in activities such as sharing favourite lines, writing in different forms and communicating their thoughts and feelings in exciting ways. Students are to see poetry as an exciting medium of expressing feelings, thoughts and ideas, which can be worked on together, or individually, and shared among the classroom community. The in depth meanings are clarified.

Review
Helping students to recognise the significance of their play with language by sharing what they have found out about poetry, about themselves and about the constructs of language through meta-language.

Application is the last stage in creative and critical thinking. Relating work on poetry to wider constructs of language development in school and home leads to lively discussions. Teachers might encourage bridges between home and school knowledge by relating achievements to literary environments they engage in outside of the classroom and by stimulating students to participate in the development of the classroom community through active involvement and acknowledgement of private and corporate literary practices. This represents a generic approach to the teaching of poetry but the following demonstrates how socioconstructivist principles can be applied specifically in a literary session. In the following session, the poem The Rose and the Bee is chosen as the focus for the event.

Orientation
Arousing students’ interests, emotion and intellect by encouraging students to brainstorm collectively about things that are related to roses and bees and collecting ideas about the flower, rose and the animal, bee in separate columns.

Elicitation/structuring
This stage is related to allowing students time to think individually about experiences about roses and bees and love, sharing responses with partner, then with table groups, asking students to meditate upon ideas they have shared together.

Intervention/restructuring
It is about encouraging students to play with language by giving time as a whole class, and in their table groups, to discuss the meaning of the first verse and how the language, imagery and structure used conveys meaning and heightens impact and urging students to think about the way in which they can communicate their experiences of love, give and take. The attention is focused upon the pronoun “you” in the first stanza and question Marks and “I” in the second stanza and punctuation mark “period”.

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It is related to helping students to recognise significance of play with language by each group sharing their poem, and discussing how their imagery, language and structure conveys meaning.

Application

In the application part, a combination of reader-response theory and deconstructionalism might be fused to lead to an increase in creativity of students. Binary oppositions (you and I, would and should, hold and leave, rose and bee) are found in each text and students are asked to find out the hierarchy and then reverse the situation and study the text according to the perspective of the repressed or suvberted binary polarity. Students might be asked to choose whether they prefer to be roses or bees and what they could do in a love relationship.

CONCLUSION

The over all purposes of using poetry can be summarized in the following way. Students are expected to have a discussion on the purpose, insight or knowledge communicated, on something surprising/unexpected insights into the subject matter, to show zest, confidence, thinking “outside the box”, to avoid giving a superficial thought, to understand freshness or language or devices to convey an image or meaning, to have playfulness with language, interesting/fresh/precise vocabulary, humor/cleverness/irony, ambiguity, tension, paradox, sense of structure or coherence, sense of structure or form or rhythm, narrative/action and to show sympathy for the characters /animals in the poem (Connor Green and et al, 2005)

Carter notes it is important for teachers to understand the creativity present in spoken and written discourse for “creativity and cultural embedding are not the exclusive preserve of canonical texts but are pervasive throughout the most everyday uses of language” (2004, p. 21). Through increasing their understanding teachers can draw parallels between everyday language and literature.

By establishing a socio-constructivist approach to poetry, students can use their knowledge of language play outside school to enhance their learning of specialised knowledge in school and so create, together with the teacher, their own literary tradition, for as Benton (1978, p. 113) observes, “the imaginative conditions within the student are right for the enjoyment of poetry”.

Poetry gives students a creative way to construct and express their ideas, and it gives teachers a new way to listen. Students who are quiet in class or have unremarkable exam grades sometimes excel in expressing their ideas through poetry, showing strengths that teachers might have otherwise missed. Just as a research question constricts the range of potential answers (Schwarz, 1999), a class assignment shapes and limits student behavior. In classes that do not encourage or reward creative work, students are unlikely to develop or demonstrate their creativity (Brent & Felder, 1992). To develop skill and confidence as creative thinkers, students need opportunities to discover and communicate fresh perspectives.

REFERENCES


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**APPENDIX**

IF I were a bee and you were a rose,
Would you let me in when the gray wind blows?
Would you hold your petals wide apart,
Would you let me in to find your heart,
If you were a rose?

"If I were a rose and you were a bee,
You should never go when you came to me,
I should hold my love on my heart at last,
I should close my leaves and keep you fast,
If you were a bee."

SARA TEASDALE
Classroom poems are funny and full of variety. They make a class really lively and motivating. Poetry can be oral or written, or both. They can be read aloud for developing oral- pronunciation ability, or they can be written to develop creative- linguistic abilities in English. Poems demand a lot of expressive ability on the part of the learners, so they engage the learners for the creation of meaning. Besides, using poetry in the class allows the children to express in the “little English” they have developed in the beginning years of learning. It develops confidence in the learners for produ