

CREATIVE WRITING FOR EFL CLASSROOM: STUDENTS' PERCEPTION ON ITS BENEFITS

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History Received: October 2023 Revised: November 2023 Published: January 2024	<i>Within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context of higher education, there is a discernible emphasis on academic writing, often overshadowing the realm of creative writing. Nevertheless, creative writing remains a prevalent and integral component of EFL education. This study endeavors to scrutinize the perceptions of EFL students regarding creative writing and elucidate the potential benefits derived from its practice. Employing a qualitative approach, the research conducted in-depth interviews as its primary mode of data collection, engaging six students enrolled in an English Education Study Program in Indonesia. These students had actively chosen to participate in an elective course centered on literary works. The study's findings revealed nuanced perspectives among students, highlighting the intricacies associated with creative writing. Students perceive creative writing as intriguing, underscoring the necessity for its inclusion in higher education. Simultaneously, they acknowledge its potential difficulty and emphasize the importance of clarity in its instructional delivery. Furthermore, the research discerned that creative writing serves as a valuable tool for emotional expression, a conduit for the development of creativity and imagination, and a means to refine writing and language skills. The implications of these findings extend beyond the conventional realm of language mastery, emphasizing the multifaceted advantages that creative writing offers in an educational context. Consequently, educators in higher education are urged to deliberate and meticulously plan the incorporation of language in creative writing classes or activities. Recognizing and leveraging the broader educational benefits of creative writing can enhance the pedagogical approach, fostering a more comprehensive and enriching learning experience for EFL students.</i>
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INTRODUCTION

Creative writing has been used in language education amidst the academic writing scheme. Its offer of a more flexible and freer concept of writing might help students improve their writing skills more comfortably. In fact, it has been proven to be able to impact positively on students' success in academic writing (Şenel, 2018). A study by Santillán-Iñiguez and Rodas-Pacheco (2022) to students of TEFL major found that Haiku poem has a statistically positive influence to students' academic writing skills, especially in relation to their language and writing organization. In addition to this, a more indept analysis on the case found that students felt that they are more confident in their academic writing after they have learned using the Haiku poems as well as believed that their writing became better in its development and communicative quality (J. Santillán-Iñiguez et al., 2023).

This goes to show that in any writing, creativity will be needed, including in a formal writing. Therefore, using creative writing in an academic venue might have this merit.

Afterall, in composing a creative writing work, students still use their real-life logic and reasoning (Težak, 2015). One example is when they need to build a character, they still see if in real life, the character's traits will likely exist or not (Težak, 2015). Creative writing is also said to improve critical thinking (Kirmizi, 2015), as what needed in writing an academic piece.

However, including creative writing in an academic scene can also pose a challenge. One of them is in the way the creative works are gauged. Analyzing different literatures, Athanasopoulou and Douzina (2022) argued that a generous and easy grade will lead to students' underestimating the course, but a difficult good grade can also encourage a writer's block. Another issue could be from students' initial behavior before they even start writing. Ahmadi (2019) found in his study that most students did not feel that they had the talent to do creative writing and few of them feel insecure about their writing because it was not something they regularly did. However, the study also found that behavior modification could be a solution to these problems.

Despite the challenges that it might pose, using creative writing in an academic setting has been found to offer many benefits. Hill (2019) argued that creative writing cannot only produce good writers, but also thoughtful and reflective community, but emphasized on its well-done instruction in order to produce that impact. This is a notable statement since often time, creative writing activities can be in the form of a mere summarizing or explaining proverbs activity, which might be considered boring by students (Kirmizi, 2015). Another thing to consider when a teacher is to implement creative writing in a course is the students' expectation of the class since it may "lead to perceived pleasantness of the course" (Burkšaitienė, 2014, p. 669). A specific positive example, specific rules and strategies, a focus on real world challenges and problem solving, a work that can be displayed, major focus on practices, and a teacher who uses more target language are also expected in a creative writing class (Asri et al., 2022).

In addition, persistent writing activities are crucial since this can build students' awareness that to express themselves in creative writing, they need to understand themselves, the people and things around them, the relationships among humans and nature, to sympathize and empathize, to use figurative languages for building certain depictions and to recognize their musical effects, and to create writing that represent their personal thoughts, but publicly important (Gang, 2005). Multiple writing activities are also important in order to build a strong writing since as found in the study by Mansoor, Saad, and Adil (2021), writing engagement is one of the factors that can increase students' motivation to write. The engagement is likely present when recurrent activities are done. An analysis on a student's narrative writing showed that the student tended to use words and topics that closely reflected her personal, emotional life, and the ones that she had produced previously. When asked to create a new form of writing, she chose to write something completely new, but prefer to write what she had been familiar with in her other forms of creative writing (Bailey & Bizzaro 2017).

Creative Writing, or writing based on one's imagination, gives freedom to write without too many binding rules. Kirmizi, (2015) placed an importance on creativity, ownership, subjectivity, and imagination in creative writing. In line with this, a study by Težak (2015) found that students tended to avoid clichés in their narrative stories, and thought about how to create an story that involves plot twists in order to improve its attractiveness to readers. This shows that when conditioned, students could make a conscious decision to be creative. In addition, a study conducted by Kirmizi (2015) found that creative writing made students more interested in writing and felt that their creativity was stimulated. In addition, creative writing, has also been found to be able to build students' vocabulary knowledge, where the students

are able to choose the use of words that have the same meaning but with slightly different connotations (Smith, 2013). Its aesthetic nature can also help students improve their self esteem, provide freedom to play with language, and develop awareness (Babae, 2015, as cited in Şenel, 2018).

Creative writing can be applied in any forms, and it will be beneficial in any way as scholars have suggested and investigated. Hecke (2011) suggested graphic novels to enhance students' intercultural competence. Workshops on creative writing has also helped veterans to reflect on their experience in narrative forms (Dieckmann, 2019). Nguyen (2017) used digital storytelling using texts, voice, images, and music as a tool to learn and engage in heritage language. Digital storytelling has also been used to improve self-efficacy (Xu, Park, & Baek 2011), or in general, for L2 development (Oskoz & Elola 2016). Storytelling with the use of think-out-loud protocol also has been used in EFL classes, although interestingly, the L2 seemed to play lesser part in the production of the writing itself than the students' real life experiences (Težak, 2015). All of the above scholars have shown that creative writing reaches more potential than a mere language learning tool. Therefore, it is imperative to understand how students perceive their experiences in creative writing. To address the issue, the current study aims to answer these following questions: What is the EFL students' perception on creative writing? And what are the benefits of creative writing as perceived by the EFL students?

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This present investigation adopts a qualitative research paradigm, specifically employing a descriptive qualitative design, a method recognized for its efficacy in comprehending and elucidating human experiences (Lambert & Lambert 2012). The selection of this design is rooted in its inherent suitability for conducting an in-depth analysis of each identified phenomenon. The descriptive qualitative design aligns seamlessly with the objectives of the study, as it is adept at capturing and portraying the intricacies surrounding the phenomenon of creative writing within an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. This approach enables the presentation of a nuanced analysis and interpretation of data derived from EFL students, shedding light on their experiences and perspectives. It is imperative to note that the deliberate choice of a descriptive qualitative design necessitated a focused and limited participant pool. Consequently, while this methodology facilitates a profound exploration of the identified phenomenon within the specified context, the outcomes are not intended for generalization to a broader audience. The study's findings, therefore, offer a localized and context-specific understanding of the complexities inherent in the interplay between creative writing and the EFL learning environment. This methodological decision underscores the commitment to depth and richness in exploring the research questions within the defined scope, acknowledging the inherent limitations of generalizability associated with the selected research design.

Research Participants

The current study involved six participants. The researchers employed some criteria to select the participants using purposive sampling. They were EFL student-teachers in an English teacher training program in one university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The participants were chosen since they have experienced in creative writing activities inside and outside classroom context. To ensure the presence of the experiences, the participants also were the ones who have taken some courses, which assigned them to produce some types of creative writing works, such as short stories, poems, and drama playscript. All participants are

students at their final year. To keep the participants' privacy, pseudonyms are used to present the findings. The pseudonyms are Nanang (male), Rizka (female), Sania (female), Bayu (male), Didi (male), and Lula (female).

Instruments

In this research endeavor, an interview guideline was meticulously employed to ensure a standardized approach to information acquisition. The semi-structured interview model was adopted, affording a balance between the facilitation of consistency and the allowance for open-ended responses. This approach aimed to elicit comprehensive and nuanced insights from participants. The interviews, ranging from approximately 30 to 60 minutes, were conducted with a conscientious consideration of time allocation to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the research subjects' perspectives. To mitigate the potential for miscommunication and enhance mutual understanding, the interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, the national language and lingua franca of the Indonesian Republic. This linguistic choice was strategically made to leverage shared language fluency and nationality between the participants and researchers. The utilization of Bahasa Indonesia not only served as a practical means of communication but also contributed to the establishment of a cultural and linguistic rapport, fostering a conducive environment for the participants to express their thoughts and experiences with clarity and depth. This methodological decision reflects a commitment to methodological rigor and cultural sensitivity in the research process.

Data Analysis

For the purpose of data analysis, the recorded interviews underwent a systematic transformation into written transcripts. The analytical process adhered to the methodological framework proposed by Saldaña (2009), encompassing distinct steps to ensure rigor and comprehensiveness. The initial stage involved data layout, during which all pertinent materials, namely the interview transcripts, were meticulously organized. Subsequently, in the pre-coding phase, researchers systematically highlighted relevant elements that corresponded to the research questions and compiled them into tables using an Excel document as a structuring tool. The subsequent step, preliminary jotting, entailed the coding of all identified data, categorizing them based on emergent patterns and themes. This meticulous coding process facilitated the systematic organization of information, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the participants' perspectives on creative writing. In the final stage of contrasting data, comparisons were drawn between the experiences and perceptions of different subjects. This comparative analysis aimed to discern similarities and differences among participants, thereby shedding light on varied perspectives on creative writing and its perceived benefits. This analytical process served as a means to delve into the nuanced nuances of how participants conceptualize and derive benefits from creative writing. To further enhance the depth of understanding, the analysis was subsequently reviewed and compared with existing literature. This comparative evaluation allowed for a broader contextualization of the findings, offering insights into the role of creative writing within a wider scope. The amalgamation of meticulous analytical steps and a contextualized literature review contributes to the scholarly rigor and theoretical grounding of the research.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

This study tries to explore the experience of students in creative writing. Findings are presented into two sections, namely students' perception on creative writing and the benefits of creative writing. General information regarding the participants' experiences is presented firstly to give a general picture of the subjects of the study. The basis of creative writing in general is creative thinking and creativity which is considered imaginative and inspiring

written products. By practicing creating verbal art, doing creative writing, or in other words, writing poetry, fiction, literary nonfiction, the participants can practice their creative writing skill. In this study, most participants felt that creative writing was a fun activity, even as a hobby for them. This interest can be seen in how often they write creatively. The types of creative writing produced are short stories, poetry, drama scripts, comic scripts, and novels. Some of these creative writing works have been tried to be published on the online web even though the results have not received a good response. The study results are obtained from the student's perspective so that there are various perspectives about creative writing based on the data obtained.

Students' perception on creative writing

Creative writing has an important role since it has a range of creative activities offered to students, and it can help render the learning process more enjoyable. Creative writing for some participants is a fun activity. Almost all participants said they were confident in their creative writing even though they realized they still had a lot to learn to write. Some participants revealed they were satisfied with their creative writing, especially when they received positive feedback from the lecturers. Some of the participants, Rizka, added that she felt more confident when she used a figure of speech in her poetry. Meanwhile, Nanang and Didi feel tolerable with their creative writing because they are not talented in this regard. It is different with Lula, who thinks she still has difficulty in writing poetry but is good in writing drama scripts. However, only a few of them are not too satisfied with their creative writing. One of the participants, Sania added that she feel less confident if her creative writing is read by other people.

In making creative writing, they also often compare their work with their friends. Some of them feel their writing is better than their friends. Unlike the others, Didi, one of the participants stated that his writing is not better than others, but unique because it is different from others. Didi also added that his writing is ordinary, not even better than others, but has its own uniqueness because it is different from stories in general. He made a drama script that revolved around himself and his group at the time of making the play script. Because it is said that his writing is unique, he also feels confident and satisfied with what he writes. Meanwhile, Rizka and Bayu feel that their writing is still not as good as others. Whether good or not their creative writing can also be influenced by the amount of experience in creative writing and also the background knowledge they have in creative writing. Participants' personal opinions regarding their creative writing are an illustration of their perspectives on their creative writing. Meanwhile, there are several other perceptions from them of creative writing more generally.

Creative writing is interesting

All participants in this study have experience in creative writing before. Most of them has an interest in creative writing. The interest of all participants in creative writing can be seen from how often they make creative writing such as poetry, novels, short stories and comic scripts. Some of them do it not because of the demands of the task or just to fulfil course grades, but because they really like creative writing. And from what they write, they are quite satisfied with the writings made by themselves and are confident in their work. Some of the participants were satisfied with their work when they reread the article, they got a feel for it. Although they are confident and feel that their writing is good, there are some students who are not confident when their writing is published and then read by someone who is more skilled in writing. One of participant, Lula, stated that "I am interested in literature, but writing creative writing in English might take time because English is not my native

language so it is a bit difficult and I am afraid of being judged by others". She is confident in her writing, but she does not feel confident if her writing is published and read by someone who is more skilled at writing. Some of the participants also said the same thing, where they felt insecure when their writings were read by more skilled people for fear of being wrong. This was also stated by Nanang, one of the participants, stated that he is quite confident in his writing but his not not confident when his writing is seen or read by others for fear that there will be errors in his writing. Most of the participants already feel confident in their writing as long as it is not read by many people or people who are more skilled in writing.

Creative writing needs to be taught in higher education

In this study, there are differences in the participants' views on the need for creative writing in higher education. Participants have conflicting ideas of the necessity of putting creative writing as part of curriculum in higher education level. One participant, Didi, thinks that creative writing will increase the workload for students. Didi also added that creative writing might be included in the curriculum when students are free to write and not burdened as assignments. On the slightly different note, other participants believed that creative writing may be taught to the curriculum in higher education because it can practice writing skills. Nanang, for instance, said that "creative writing needs to be in higher education as long as the subject is still related to writing because with creative writing I can practice writing which can have an impact on academic writing and I can also gain new vocabulary". To sum up, participants agree with the notion that creative writing needs to be added in the curriculum of higher education because it can be used to practice writing skills and increase students' vocabulary, which will positively impact their academic writing, but when it is used without burdening the students.

Creative writing can be difficult

Creative writing for some participants is enjoyable activity. In fact, they feel creative writing is one of their favorite activities. They like when they can imagine freely and play with words or use modality on words. Nonetheless, not all the participants like writing because writing is not easy. Some of the participants said there are difficulties in creative writing. As one of the participants, Lula likes creative writing but find the difficult to write in English because of problems in vocabulary, especially in making modality. In the interview session, she said that "the difficulty of creative writing is more in terms of writing structure and also figurative vocabulary so that the sentences become beautiful." However, almost all participants said they liked creative writing, starting from writing poetry, writing comic scripts and even writing novels. On the other hand, one of the participants, Didi, stated that he like writing comic scripts but sometimes find it difficult in creative writing because there is no definite formula in creative writing, in other words it is too free. Even so, most of them show an interest in creative writing.

Clarity of message is important in creative writing

In general, creative writing can be defined as a writing process based on personal creativity and expression in a form of good and interesting writing. Some participants thought that it was not only in a form of good and interesting writing, but also the message of what you wrote. As one of the participants, Bayu said that the important things in creative writing is the delivery the message to the reader. Because according to him, an article must have a clear message to the reader. In addition, although creative writing can be write freely based on imagination and creativity, it still pays attention to the grammar. Lula said that "grammar describes events that have occurred, such as the past tense, which describes conditions in the

past. So I think it's important. If you don't pay attention to grammar, then the description of the situation will also be different, and it will become unclear". Even though it can be written freely based on imagination and creativity, grammar is important in creative writing. So, as much as possible in creative writing, pay attention to the message you want to convey so that its meaning does not become ambiguous.

Benefits of Creative Writing

The creative writing activities that they have done so far have provided several benefits for students. Not only does it help students' development of language (including grammar and vocabulary), but it also contributes to their personal growth. All of the participants felt that there were benefits from the activities they did when writing creatively.

Creative writing as a tool in expressing students' feeling

Students' think creative writing can be used as a stress release or emotion release, where they can pour their abstract feelings or thoughts into writing. As one of the participants, Didi stated that "creative writing can lighten the mind because if it's been written down, it won't get stuck in mind". It can be said that creative writing could relieve the burden of the mind. We can release feelings into writing that cannot be seen by others. In addition, creative writing can also be useful for students who are not experts in expressing something because it can be transferred into writing. Bayu also added that creative writing is a place where he expresses himself because some things cannot be conveyed by words or actions, so another way to express them is by writing.

Creative writing can develop the creativity and the imagination of writers.

Some of students' think that creative writing also provides benefits to encourage students to think creatively, train imagination, and develop students' thinking more broadly, especially in making stories. Some respondents noted that creative writing helped them engage with a language in a more stimulating way and allowed them to employ their imagination. Meanwhile, Sania said that "creative writing making my ideas wider because I can write more freely". She thinks that when she writes creatively, she is freer to write down the ideas from her mind.

Creative writing can improve writing practice and language

Other benefits of creative writing are writing practice and improving their language. Rizka and Bayu agree that creative writing makes them learn and understand the structure of drama script and increases their knowledge of phrases, vocabulary, and other linguistic structures. In another statement, Lula said that "in creative writing, we train our brains to think more broadly about a story. Then also develop the brain to think about how to make our writing enjoyable for readers and the message can be conveyed". She learned how to convey messages to readers clearly through creative writing. In addition, students also learn to choose the right words for their writing through creative writing. According to one of the participants, Nanang, he feels that creative writing can train us to string words together to make a coherent sentence. Some of the benefits felt by participants indicated that creative writing has a positive impact on students both linguistically (writing skills) and psychologically (articulating students' voices and expressing their identity). Through creative writing, it can develop creative personalities characterized by independence of views, flexible thinking, high productivity, and originality which are needed in every occupation in a long term.

Discussion

To answers the first research question, in general, all participants, one way or another, show positive perception about their own ability in creative writing. The confidence is either wholistic or partial, since the participants also showed certain insecurities. The insecurity tends to be related to the involvement of other people, namely, when they have to display their work or when they compare their work to others'. This insecurity is in line with the study of Ahmadi (2019), where students were also found to have insecurity in doing creative writing, even though the reason is different, namely their lack of experience in creative writing. The finding also partly corroborate to the finding in Burkšaitienė's (2014), which found that students were confident about their creativity, but they admitted that they lack of experience. This is in contrast to the students' expectation in the study of Asri et al. (2022) to display the work produced in creative writing class. This is likely due to the participants' lack of experience or prior opportunities to showcase their works. It can also be caused by the fear of unpleasant comments from their peers or higher self-expectation since some participants compared themselves to more experienced writers.

Previous studies and scholars have proposed the role of creative writing in language development (Hill, 2019; Kirmizi, 2015; Nguyen, 2017; Oskoz & Elola, 2016; Şenel, 2018) although at times less significantly (Težak, 2015). However, in the current study, language was perceived as the barrier for the participants, who believed that this is what makes creative writing in English difficult and caused their partial insecurity. In the current study, it is likely that participants' self-recognition of their creative ability might be not as high since in theory, when someone highly identify themselves as a creative individual, the likelihood of their undertaking activities considered creative is also high (Karwowski & Lebuda 2017).

Despite the struggle, participants still believed that creative writing is interesting and should be taught in higher education since it is also believed to help the students' writing skill in general and language development. This corroborates to the idea that creative writing will help the skills in writing in general or academic writing (Kirmizi, 2015; Şenel, 2018). This perception might also relate to the participants' expectations of the lesson. For instance, the participants expected that by doing creative writing in class, they can gain new vocabulary and writing skills. This expectation is similar to what was found in Burkšaitienė's (2014), where students expected to gain some type of knowledge and skills in writing English. Other likely reasons to perceive the need of creative writing in higher education might also relate to the participants' experiences in the classroom the attended. As found by Mansoor, Saad, and Adil (2021), that the quality of teaching, feedback and classroom climate influence students' motivation in doing creative writing.

Answering the second research question, the participants have shared their perceived benefits of creative writing. They viewed creative writing as a way to express their emotion. This is expected since creative writing is built in this notion that it should help students express and understand themselves (Gang, 2005). In fact, its personal connection to lived experience and self-discovery are likely what makes creative writing interesting for many students. It is also no surprise that students believed that creative writing help them develop their creativity and imagination since both are important parts of creative writing (Kirmizi, 2015). Creative writing activities in classrooms generally pose different standard from academic writing. Its emphasize on the freedom of expression will appeal to students in any level of language proficiency. Finally, the participants also expressed similar opinion about how creative writing can be the tools to help language learning, which is in line with aforementioned studies.

Students' perception on their learning process is significant in determining their learning experience and result. The current study has shown that most of the perceptions are

in line with what have been predicted or expected in previous studies in different settings and contexts. This poses an idea of the importance to include creative writing in daily learning. The study indicated that language can be the aspect improved or the one causing barrier. This shows that the way the language is featured in the classroom of creative writing is noteworthy.

CONCLUSION

The study sought for the answers of what the students think about creative writing and its benefits. The first finding revealed that the participants expressed that they perceived creative writing as interesting but at times difficult, clarity of ideas in creative writing is important, and that creative writing should be taught in higher education. It is inferred that creative writing is still relevant for higher education in EFL context. It is useful as well as challenging toward the students. As the second finding, the participants believed that creative writing helps with their personal emotional expression, their creativity and imagination, and their language improvement. It reflects that creative writing benefits students both in linguistic and non-linguistic aspect.

The findings implied that higher education teachers need to pay attention to details to how language will be used and featured in a creative writing course since the merit seems to be more complex than a mere linguistic development. What also needs to be considered is that students might have a common perception that creative writing is difficult. This relates to the students' unfamiliarity with creative writing activities, especially the ones they must accomplish in a classroom context. It is recommended that higher education institutions include creative writing activities in more classes and facilitate the students to hone their creative writing ability. This might offer advantages beyond increased creativity.

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