Student autonomy through creativity

Susan Laura Sullivan
Tokai University
susan.sullivan1@uowmail.edu.au

Abstract

Creative writing, creative projects, and projects involving creativity incorporate high personal investment from students. The work generated from this input can be used as a “springboard” to deepen general learning. When conducted in English Medium Instruction classes (EMI), or in classes with related forms of teaching, the learning of English as an Additional Language (EAL) can be enhanced as a by-product (as implied by Allwright, 2013, p.6). As part of an EMI course designed by the author, second-year undergraduate comparative culture majors at a Japanese university explored aspects of creativity by researching elements of twentieth century art movements, including writing methods. From these literary guidelines students produced their own creative work, which ultimately appeared as part of a whole-class poster presentation. Among other features, students focused on the history and certain literary personalities of the movements as part of their research. The main interests of this article are learner autonomy, agency and growth generated a) from using this creative student-produced work, and b) from engagement with the research and creative material. It shares details of class activities and evaluations from the yearlong course, including examples of student literature. Learner rather than language development holds the stronger focus of the paper. However, as the lessons were conducted in a foreign language (English), aspects of language development are touched upon.

Key words: student autonomy, student agency, creative writing, cognitive proficiency, creativity, student-produced materials, Futurism, Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Gutai, Fluxus

For the final assignment of a two-semester EMI comparative culture course, vaguely titled Pre-Seminar II and Seminar I, students initially and ostensibly explored the writing methods of the Avant Garde Futurist, Cubist, Dadaist, Surrealist, and Gutai/Fluxus art groups. Gutai and Fluxus contain similarities, so they were studied together. This essay outlines some of the reasons for selecting the course content, and the overarching methods of instruction. It then discusses some of the benefits of literature/creativity in practice, including the personal development and growth that can stem from project-based work. Examples of student writing and feedback are provided.

The Art Movements

Developments in industry, economics, society and culture in the early twentieth century ushered in art movements such as Futurism, Cubism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. These European movements contained literary components, and these were influenced by new technology, reaction to the horrors of World War I, and Freud's theories, among other stimuli. Certain members were aligned with or discarding various political beliefs, such as Fascism, Communism, Anarchism and Socialism (Centre Pompidou, 2005/2007; Duchamp, Naumann, Obalk & Taylor, 2000; Museum of Modern Art [MoMa], 2009). During World War I, pacifist Dada members established Cabaret Voltaire in Switzerland (Rumens, 2009). World War Two saw members, including women, joining the French resistance, avoiding or being sent to German concentration camps, and surviving or dying in those prisons (Academy of American poets, n.d.; Glover Goldlewski, 2001). Protagonists held great sway in creative circles across the world, were possibly murdered by Stalinist agents, had multiple affairs and ménage-à-trois, and committed suicide at an alarming rate (Karpel, 2007). Both sexes were active and extraordinary (Gammel & Zelazo, 2011; Glover Goldlewski, 2001). In the 1950s and 60s in Japan and the U.S., Gutai and Fluxus also sprang from and reacted against the values that had taken nations once again to war (Pollack, 2013; Willette, 2012). The agents of the art movements lived in interesting times and held interesting lives, so the source material is potentially rich for learner engagement. Bibby writes of Japanese students operating in a "conceptual vacuum" in terms of understanding how prior events can influence current ones, particularly politically (2014, p. 21). Approaching world events through the people,

literature and art of the times can strengthen students' general awareness on many levels and helps fill that vacuum. This new knowledge can lead to deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of past and present, and leave students with a wider global outlook. Aspects of this are explored below.

"Learners are capable of taking learning seriously"

The above is a quote from Allwright (2010, p. 2). The assumption behind the statement might be common sense for many teachers, but language teachers and learners often face uninspiring material, particularly if at a university level the students are non-English majors and instructors have no control over course materials (extrapolated from Yoshida, 2009, p. 6, p. 10; as suggested by Seeroi, 2012). Both Allwright (2006, in Gieve & Miller, p. 20) and Yoshida (2013, pp. 9-10) outline former students harbouring resentment toward both general and language learning, perhaps due to having been "'captive learners'" when younger (Allwright), or from facing unrealistic expectations of language use and evaluation based on native-speaker-like goals of production (Yoshida). These attitudes and circumstances can extend into higher education.

When the opportunity arises, teaching content using exercises involving learner interaction and negotiation might help ameliorate possible student aversion toward lessons conducted in non-native languages (Allwright, 2013; Gieve & Miller, 2006). However, there is a higher cognitive "processing load" when learning in a foreign language, so greater aversion is also possible (Skehan, among others, 1996, p. 54). Avant-garde art movements are not necessarily well known to native speakers of English let alone EAL students. As such, this topic can be removed from students' life experiences and seem to hold little relevance. Accordingly, the risk of aversion increases again. On the other hand, when students try to find answers to that which "puzzles" them, as opposed to finding definitive answers to "problems", it can be argued that curiosity and cognitive engagement are piqued, and new concepts can gain validity (Allwright & Lenzuen, 1997 in Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Allwright, 2000, in Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Gieve & Miller, 2006; Kapur, 2008). Creating puzzlement, confusion *and* interest could be seen as stock-in-trade for the art movements mentioned above, for example, Dadaist Marcel Duchamp's art piece, "Fountain" (a

urinal), or Yoko Ono's Fluxus performance art. When students work together to create, discuss and reach conclusions on that which might initially confuse them, this interest and shared burden of learning can provide the impetus to negotiate a way through cognitive complexity, especially if a connection is made with the material (Gieve & Miller, 2006, p. 22; Hadley, 2001).

Though they might seem abstract in nature, the creative composition methods of the art groups are tangible in execution, and this tangibility can link learners to the work and movements. Creating like pieces of work can thereby lessen the cognitive burden of application while addressing the upper and lower echelons of frameworks for learning, such as those outlined in Anderson and Krathwohl's 2001 modified version of Bloom's taxonomy (as cited in Krathwohl, 2002, among others). That is, " . . . simple to more complex and challenging ways of thinking" are employed when completing assigned tasks, such as understanding how to make creative work, producing it and then pursuing other areas related to the subject matter (Wilson, 2013, p. 2).

Students in Japan are enrolled in a wide variety of courses, including liberal arts, international communication and comparative culture. Within these fields, a tradition exists of encouraging participant interest in global perspectives. In fact, it seems to have been a Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) aim for some time for students across all levels of education (MEXT, 2008-2009, 2009; Yoshida, 2009, 2013). With the formation of the Global 30 universities – institutions selected as centres for internationalisation – courses encouraging diversity of thought have arisen or are being implemented in a number of establishments (13 to date). Global *jinzai*, a domestic programme with the aim of encouraging more outward-looking attitudes among students, reinforces this aim. Some aspects of this diversity, among other hoped-for outcomes, will conceivably be reflected in students being able to confidently make decisions and relate to others on a local and global level (Brown, 2014, p. 52; MEXT, 2009, 2012, n.d.). Many non-Global 30 universities run courses with similar aims (Brown, p. 3).

This diversity can also be reflected in ideas generated from higher education and research. New ideas are often first encountered at university (Sen, 2015, in Colangelo, 2015). They also stem from giving students opportunities to take their

learning “seriously” (Allwright, 2010, p. 2). Our students are young adults, not children. In keeping with the previous paragraph, having enrolled in liberal arts or similar courses, they may already have a disposition towards the wider world around them, and may be mentally ready for cognitively challenging and diverse topics, such as non-mainstream twentieth century art movement philosophies. *However*, their English ability might not be commensurate with their curiosity (Yoshida, 2009, p. 10; Sullivan, 2014b). A number of students taking EMI courses might find they have reasonable Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), but are lacking in Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP, as defined by Cummins, 1976 as cited in 1980, 1999, 2000a & 2000b; Yoshida, 2009, 2013; see also Sullivan, 2014b). The reasons why this is so range beyond the scope of this essay, but MEXT is hoping to address the situation at an elementary and secondary school level through the New Course of Study. If successful, new graduates will be more able to easily undertake EMI courses at a tertiary level in the future (Yoshida, 2009, pp. 2-10).

In the meantime, students may not yet have developed CALP to deal with divergent topics, but if they are never exposed to divergent topics they may never get the chance to develop it. Yoshida argues that if Japanese can use their “own” English, a form of plurilingualism, to achieve higher cognitive levels of language use, such as debating or persuasion, then the chances of them becoming more self-assured in their non-native language is a possible side-effect (2013, p. 14). Even if students are unable to flawlessly express opinions in the target language, it does not mean that learning how to, and being given the chance to express themselves is a waste of time. To the contrary, it can lead to satisfying some of the general aims of global *jinzai*, such as instigating the ability to “. . . reason, argue and debate . . . “, broadening perspectives, and can lead to personal growth at the least (Cabinet Office, 2012 in Yoshida, 2013, pp. 2-3).

The philosophical ideas of the aforementioned art groups have held some universal appeal at various times in history, including within Japan. Students, as stated above, may find connections to these ideas on numerous levels, as many people have before them. Avant-Garde groups challenge mainstream norms, and university is a safe place to scrutinize thoughts beyond the hegemony. Youth is often the harbinger of change. EAL student-created literature and cognitively challenging topics taught in

a non-native language can create pathways into wider worlds, even if only on a level of personal enjoyment.

The Creative Nexus

Futurism, Cubism, Surrealism, Dadaism and Gutai/Fluxus all have writing methods which give students the chance to " . . . becom[e] creatively literate . . ." (Disney, 2014, p. 7). Disney, speaking generally about second language learners undertaking creative writing courses, says that when this happens, " . . . [c]reative Writing (SL) students are invited to enter a 'life transforming conversation' within a community of mentors, peers and literatures" (p. 7). And beyond. For teachers who can expand a literature course, or implement a course which has some components of literature, looking at and using not only these methods, but also exploring the movements' philosophies, times, politics, influences, work and people, means that students examine literature not only as something worthy of analysis and reflection, but also as a living, breathing, metamorphosing entity. With student-generated work "spiralization" (Taylor, 1976, p. 317) can occur, where original creations interact, like baker's yeast, with their environment and are converted into all manner of interconnected activities and learning opportunities, including many which encourage language use and development.

Within the EAL field, "Creative Writing (SL) . . . avoids the use of canonized texts as 'read-only' artefacts" (Disney, 2014, p. 7). Through producing work, students develop an ownership of the language that is inclusive of them, especially as they are the ones manipulating it. As such both the work and language are more likely to have relevance and validity to them. This relevancy, a form of learning proficiency, can lead to language proficiency through intrinsic motivation (Vallerand, 1997, in Dörnyei, 1998, p. 121; Dörnyei, 1998, Allwright, 2013). Guided exploratory activities can lead to students taking responsibility for their learning, which is an aspect of both independent and interdependent attitudes towards study. Teaching from the inside out rather than the outside in – that is, students create work and study it rather than studying and analysing the creative work of others, or incorporating elements of both approaches – helps avoid the pitfall of passivity. When students have created the literature, they are the originators of the source material and are more able to express

their cognitive and abstract understanding when given appropriate academic training and scaffolding.

Art Movement Poster Presentations

The second half of the Seminar 1 course detailed was devoted to creating poster presentations of the art movements. As a precursor to the course, first semester Pre-Seminar 2 students explored and produced certain types of poetry, including shape poems. They learned poetry analysis skills, and posted reflections on the creative work of their peers on a class blog. For examples of student work and further explanation see Sullivan, 2014a.

The beginning of semester two continued the poetic theme. Students made a "Words in Freedom" poem in pairs (see Figure 1). Words in Freedom is an Italian Futurist idea from the early twentieth century. The founder, Marinetti, wished to create a new language, free from grammar and syntax (MoMa, 2009). His poems reflect this. Words in Freedom are based on onomatopoeia and typography, and this form of poetry was selected because sound is an almost universal experience and easily accessible in concept. Further exploration of the Words in Freedom poems can be found at Sullivan, 2014b.

Figure 1. Words in Freedom poem: "Jungle". (S. Yamamori, S. Yamauchi & S. Takeuchi, personal communication, 2012; see also Sullivan, 2014b)

These activities led to the most challenging assignment of the year, the creation and implementation of a poster presentation of the five art groups. Despite the overall difficulty, the entry points to the topics explored were approachable. As with Futurism (Words in Freedom poems), tangible production methods (sound) led to the abstract (the representation and explanation of sound). The practical *application* of abstract ideas leads to further practical *examples* of the abstract. Students were protagonists and learners. Autonomy stems from creation, and understanding of chosen or allocated topics.

In groups of three or four, depending upon the size of the class, students chose one of the five art movements. The end product was a poster comprising 10-12 categories including: Philosophy and history; a famous writer and biography; creative work of the famous writer, and reasons for selection; a group poem using the art group's writing method; an explanation of the student group poem; the art movement's writing method, and a Japanese proponent of the movement (could be a visual artist), among others.

Analysis of the creative work selected was not necessary, but most students, drawing from first semester's experience, did some form of it, thereby independently recycling their learning. Output improved through practice. Students demonstrated acquisition of the life-long learning skills that Allwright holds as a core objective of a successful classroom by doing this, because they acted autonomously (2013, p. 9).

Writing Methods

Futurism, has the writing method of sound. Cubism uses the familiar method of shape poetry encountered in the first semester, although it also incorporates other aspects, which were often explored and used. Dadaism has the easy to execute method of "cut-ups" and found poetry. Surrealism has fairly easy to execute, due to time constraints and randomness, methods of exquisite corpse/cadaver, or automatic writing (see Figure 2 for an explanation). Gutai/Fluxus have a number of different methods, including small instructive "events" or "happenings"; mail art; a simple, everyday concept of writing, and the idea of there being no limits to what is considered poetry (see Figure 2).

 Dada cut-up poem (M. Hayashi, M. Koshino, H. Takaki, personal communicaton, 2014).	 Guitai/Fluxus Mail Art (H. Murayama, K. Sawada, K. Usui, personal communication, 2014). Students chose to make mail art using global headlines, published on the same date, to highlight the shared experience of negative occurrences.
 Surrealist poem (M. Morishita, S. Sakai, S. Miyachi, personal communication, 2014) Exquisite corpse/cadaver: Members individually write a number of sentences at the same time. Sentences are cut up, placed face down on a surface, and randomly selected. The order in which they are chosen determines the poem.	 Cubist poem (R. Ichihashi, M. Kokai, S. Yamamoto, personal communication, 2014). Shape poems were explored, but Cubism also involves play on words and a cyclic sense of no beginning or end.

Figure 2. Examples of student work employing the art movement writing methods

The Process

The philosophies of the movements, particularly in the cases of Gutai/Fluxus and Cubism, can greatly influence the work produced. This indicates student absorption and

reflection of different outlooks through their creative work. They create in similar ways to those who have gone before them. Power is gained in knowing they can do this, and knowing they have the freedom to do so (Disney, 2014, p. 3). For example, Figure 3 shows a pile of chairs one upon the other. The students of a Gutai/Fluxus group strew paper figures at the base of the structure, leaving one figure precariously atop. When asked about meaning, they said it represented the pressures of society. When asked why or how it was a poem, they replied, “We believe the Gutai idea that not all poems are written” (C. Ishihara, S. Kuroda, M.K. Kang, Y. Z. Zhao, personal communication, 2012). They became experts in the classroom in their area of study to some degree, as opposed to novices (as defined by Duff, 2005, p. 56), and illustrated this through their creative work. Their reasoning was very clear to me and to their classmates, which, in addition to illustrating learner agency, again tied into general MEXT aims of wanting students to be able to express and support their opinions and ideas (Committee to Discuss Development of Language Ability, translated in Yoshida, 2009, p. 3).

Figure 3. Gutai poem, (C. Ishihara, S. Kuroda, M. K. Kang, Y. Z. Zhao, personal communication, 2012).

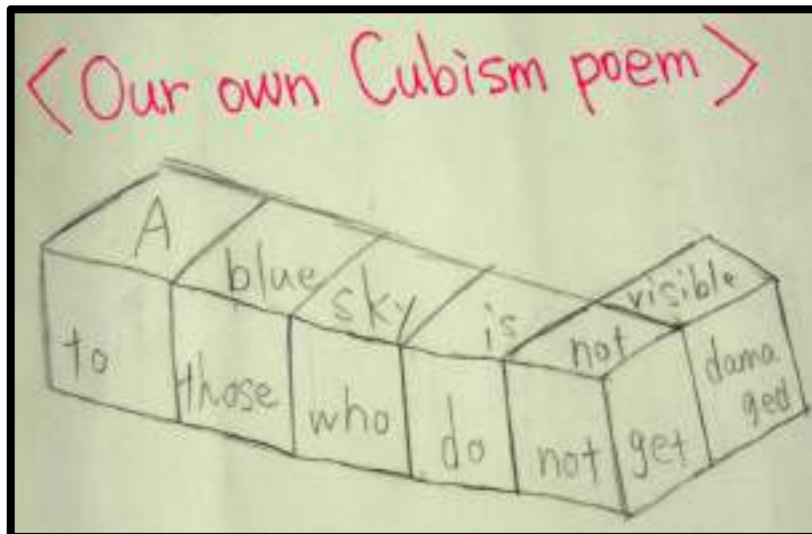

Figure 4. “A blue sky is not visible . . .” (M. Y. Hee, C. Niimi & R. Mizuno, personal communication, 2013; See also Sullivan, 2014b).

Figure 4 illustrates a Cubist poem. The group’s work shows a deep understanding of some Cubist literature tenets, such as unclear starts and beginnings, word play (implying multiple meaning), circular, continuous sensibilities and the actual physical shape (for a deeper analysis, see Sullivan, 2014b).

Being able to produce creatively gives students access to both the lower and upper rungs on the ladder to academic proficiency and/or academic language use, and also to broader learning proficiency. Through this process, their ownership and expression of the second language, as stated before, increases. In fact, it could be argued that a form of Creole (Disney, 2014, p.1), or interlanguage is developed (Selinker, 1972), although much of the work succeeds beyond TESOL labels (Chin, as cited in Jose, ¶ 5). Disney writes,

> ESL/EFL proto-writers deepen connections with their own emergent voice: indeed, placing pressure on expressivist modes can motivate the second-language learner to expand their L2 material . . . L2 proto-writers are asked to re-read L1 literatures while exploring possible responses to the question, ‘how can I do something *materially akin* to what has been done in this text?’ (2014, p. 3, emphases in the original).

The examples of work in this essay show that students do indeed ask this question, and tie their creations into traditions that have gone before them. Often research on the topic or

chosen writer was not available in Japanese, so students had to put their English skills to work when researching and writing the assignment, and when explaining it to their classmates. Furthermore, just as many NNS writers wrote in French, some students read French poems in English translation, and were, not only in method, but in terms of writing in another language, following literary antecedents.

Peer Discussion Classes and Student-led Instruction

Students produced their posters within a three-week period. Included in their posters were their poems or prose, and the other areas detailed above. The following two weeks were committed to poster presentations, which took half the class time. Initially, one half of a group interacted with students from other groups who asked questions about the posters. In all, there were five teaching groups. The next week group members changed roles. The last forty-five minutes of these classes was devoted to students instructing one another in the writing methods of their art movement through collaboration. As most methods allowed speedy execution, teaching was done on a rotating basis with each group given a limited time to produce work. As there was little time for reflection, the work produced was nascent, but the activities strengthened the students' BICS and some CALP, consolidated and validated the knowledge they had gained, and flagged them as experts in their fields of study within the classroom. They taught three to four times, which helped develop automaticity and confidence (see Sullivan, 2014b, p. 14).

All activities generated a lot of enjoyment through curiosity, and created confidence through interaction and explanation (Sullivan, 2014b, p.12; Seminar I student feedback, personal communication, 2014). Allwright (2013), citing Trim (1988) argues that the benefits of students administering their "own learning" has long-reaching effects, including the transference of learning skills into other areas of life beyond the course in which they first acquired and applied them (p. 9). Learner development leads to language development (p. 6). Major aspects of the former encourage interaction and negotiation between students. When these are used for "truly useful learning opportunities" (p. 8) they lead to the life-long learning referenced above. Student creative writing, both in the form of production and analysis, is a way for students to develop strong connections with the content, and therefore closer connections with trajectories from the content, including the actual progress and direction of their own learning.

Language use

Student feedback indicated that while the participants enjoyed interaction with their peers, they were aware of shortcomings in their own vocabulary and scope of expression. They were pleased to be able to communicate in their “own English”, an aspect of plurilingualism (Yoshida, 2013), but were keen on having similar chances to study and use English so that they could learn to convey their ideas more efficiently (Seminar 1, personal communication, 2014). This possibly reflects students wanting to impart their knowledge beyond the fulfilment of task requirements. It definitely reflects the concept of “noticing” as a tool to improve language use (Schmidt, 1990, 1995; Swain, 1995, 2005; Sullivan, 2014b, p 14).

Within written language, focus on form was reflected in the analyses and reports, and students noticed the incidences where weak structures inhibited reader comprehension. Speaking and listening activities were mainly used to encourage communication, confidence, instruction, fluency and forms of automaticity. As the students experienced a number of similar peer activities throughout the year for previous assignments, improvement was seen, even in pupils with a lower ability, in terms of trying their best to convey meaning in English. It could be argued that this motivation to speak came from a personal investment in the materials. As the work produced was unique, creators could not rely on others to explain or clearly infer the meaning. The creators understood certain idiosyncrasies and seemed determined to inform other students of the significance of aspects of their work. Student feedback reflected delight and surprise at some conceptual representations, such as ideas behind the mail art seen in figure 4 (Seminar 1, personal communication, 2014). Students browsed their own and other students’ posters, even during breaks, which not only reflected engagement beyond class requirements, but also developing autonomy and the use of learning strategies, as they could use that information for upcoming interactions with their peers.

Throughout the five weeks, all macro skills are addressed, as are many “macro-strategies”, such as heuristic learning, in that circumstances are created whereby students can independently discover new information (as defined by Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 68-69). Krashen’s input plus one (1982, 2009, p. 33) was encountered as a matter of course. Nearly all situations were initially not part of students’ general schemata, but meaning was ultimately discovered and manufactured by them.

Conclusion

English accepts many forms and is the language of choice for a number of non-native writers (Disney, 2014, p. 1). Creative work is an area where students can “let their guard down” a little as they break or beautify the rules of language, whether knowingly or unknowingly. This is not to say that more rigorous and practically useful language is without value in classes which have some focus on creative output. It plays its part in the form of research, explanation, analysis, discussion, and listening, among other areas. The capacity to explain ideas clearly and effectively, to develop an understanding of deeper notions, and to give one’s opinion, are sought after skills (Committee to Discuss Development of Language Ability, translated in Yoshida, 2009, p. 3). By believing that students have the capability to understand ideas they may never have encountered, and that one way to open them up to new ideas is through experiential learning with a focus on creativity, challenging and surprising works of literature can be produced. These can create a very real connection with English, and a world of wonder and exploration for students and teachers alike.

Acknowledgement

Alternate versions of portions of this paper were previously published elsewhere (see essay and reference list). The findings, argument and analysis presented here are original to this paper.

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