

Creative Writing in English and Emirati Student Motivation

Patrick Dougherty

Dr Patrick Dougherty is a Faculty member at Abu Dhabi Men's College, Higher Colleges of Technology, UAE where he founded the first Poetry Slam program in the UAE at the College. Previously he served on the faculty of the University of Hyogo, Himeji, Japan, and as a supervisor of English instruction for the city of Himeji. He holds master's degrees in history, education, and applied linguistics as well as an earned Doctorate in Education, and has published academically, both textbooks and articles, and in the genres of the short story and poetry. His service interests are in the areas of teacher training and support in the developing world and his research interests are in student motivation, the use of creative writing in EFL and ESL, and student heritage and its use in the classroom.

All that is best in the Arabs has come to them from the desert: Their deep religious instinct, which has found expression in Islam; their sense of fellowship, which binds them as members of one faith; their pride of race; their generosity and sense of hospitality; their dignity and the regard which they have for the dignity of others as fellow human beings; their humor, their courage and patience, the language which they speak and their passionate love of poetry (Thesiger, 1994, p. 87).

The questions addressed in this case study are: (1) do Emirati students perceive creative writing in English as motivational in their English studies; (2) does creative writing encourage Emirati students to write in English outside of the classroom; and (3) does creative writing in English motivate Emirati English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students to be better users of English? Though answered in this case study from the perspective of a men's college in Abu Dhabi, the answers to these questions may have more widespread applications to English programs in general. Creative writing in English is often not considered the domain of the EFL or English as a Second Language (ESL) student, but rather as the prerogative of the native speaker. This study will suggest that introducing creative writing to ESL or EFL programs can serve as a powerful motivational force in the classroom, benefiting the students academically, emotionally, and linguistically.

Keller (1983, cited in Dörnyei, 2001b, p. 116) argued that motivation should be at the center of the education dynamic; yet, it was often neglected in academic discourse. Has that changed in the new millennium? According to Dörnyei (2001a), it has not:

Teachers are supposed to teach the curriculum rather than motivate learners, and the fact that the former cannot happen without the latter is often ignored. For example, I am not aware of a single L2 teacher-training program worldwide in which the development of skills in motivating learners would be a key component of the curriculum (p. 27).

This is unfortunate, as the discussion of second language learner (L2) motivation has some pedigree, and can be traced back to, among others, Gardner and Lambert, two Canadian social psychologists. In 1959 they began exploring the issues surrounding L2 learner motivation, using a social psychological approach. Their argument was that learning another language is unlike any other academic or educational goal in that it requires the individual to accept elements of an alien culture into the context of the student's life (Guilloteaux, 2007).

This research paper is one way that the author has taken the challenge of examining motivation in the context of learning, and specifically in the context of L2 learning in the United Arab Emirates. It is hoped that Dörnyei's assertion will cease to be valid and that student motivation becomes a more central topic in both the literature on L2 learning and on teacher-training programs in the Gulf region and the world.

The Case Study

The data for this study were collected via an Internet survey given to three classes of students during the 2008–2009 and 2009–2010 academic years. The survey was voluntary, and a total of fifteen students out of a potential of approximately forty-five students responded.

In addition to the formal survey the author organized the first English language Poetry Slam in the United Arab Emirates on April 30th, 2009. Students and faculty from the college where the study was conducted were invited to participate in both the Poetry Slam and an ensuing poetry anthology.

The Survey

The survey questions are shown in Appendix A. Of the twenty-eight questions, twelve were yes/no questions, two were multiple select, three were multiple option, one was a rating scale, and ten were free response. Most students took thirty-five to forty-five minutes to respond to the survey and they did so while their teacher was out of the room and with the understanding that the surveys were anonymous.

The Participants

The fifteen participants were self-selected, as the survey was voluntary. They were all male and from three separate classes taught at the same college in 2009, in the spring and autumn semesters and on a summer course. Each class had between fifteen and twenty students. The students were taught English writing throughout this period by the researcher conducting this study. The respondents were from Higher Diploma Foundations English courses and were lower intermediate to intermediate level. They studied English for approximately fifteen contact hours per week for either twenty or forty weeks. They were, on average, in their late teens or early twenties. Most were in their first year of post-secondary education.

The contact hours were divided between the skill areas of reading, listening, speaking, and writing. A variety of course materials were used. Students had laptops and access to the Internet, they were provided with level appropriate textbooks, and their classes were further enhanced by teacher-generated materials that included creative writing lessons and assignments. Two of the three classes were company or government sponsored, meaning that the students were receiving scholarships in exchange for agreeing to work for the sponsor for a set number of years after graduation. When asked what their major area of study was at the college, almost half of the respondents listed some form of engineering.

Of the fifteen participants, eleven of them went to Arabic medium elementary schools, and four went to English medium elementary schools. Later, eight attended English medium secondary schools, while seven attended Arabic medium secondary schools. Regarding their English ability, they were asked to identify what they perceived was their level. In the case of their spoken English three rated themselves as excellent, seven as good, three as average, and two as being at a basic level. Regarding their written English, the views were more modest, with only two listing themselves as excellent, six as good, and seven as average.

When asked if they had ever had any creative work published or presented in a public setting, only one of the fifteen subjects answered in the affirmative. Anecdotally, the vast majority of class members shared that they had never written anything creatively in either Arabic or English before joining the researcher's English classes at the college.

How was Creative Writing Included in the Curriculum?

Creative writing was introduced to the students via both special assignments and additions to regular course offerings. Examples of specific assignments will be described later in this paper, but a brief discussion of the methods used would be appropriate. The researcher had taught a special creative writing course in English in Bangladesh over a three year period (Dougherty, 2007; Dougherty & Dougherty, 2008). Utilizing several assignments from that experience, adjusted for the UAE, and several projects created especially for college students in Abu Dhabi, the researcher introduced creative writing to his students.

Some of the assignments dealt with the improvement of perceptions in preparation for descriptive essays or the writing of poems. For example, students were given the Five Senses Descriptive which asked each student to imagine himself at an event, or location. He was then to come up with descriptive words for each of the five senses. Used as a brainstorming device, the Five Senses Descriptive assignment can evoke a host of vocabulary words and phrases to use in creative writing. It was often used as a tool to generate vocabulary for additional writing assignments.

Another element of the course that proved useful in both creative endeavors and other kinds of writing was the use of Peer Editing (see Appendix B for an example). The aim was to encourage students to collaborate in the writing process and offer suggestions and encouragement as well as editing. According to the survey, 100% of the respondents felt that peer editing helped to improve their writing. This mirrors prior research in Bangladesh, where all respondents in surveys and focus groups declared that peer editing was useful for them in improving their English writing (Dougherty & Dougherty, 2008).

When queried, a teacher who encouraged her students to participate in the Poetry Slam explained her students' initial reactions to writing poetry and how she overcame their hesitancy:

Students : 'Write a poem in English?'
Student A : I can't do this even in Arabic, no, not me, no, teacher... please!
Student B : A poem about what?
Student C : Will it be on the progress test?
Teacher : O.K. Watch...this is one way to do it.....

Bit by bit a simple beach, or car were transformed by "juicy pineapples dripping, ...thick exhaust blackening." Then the re-writes ventured more exotically into daring metaphor and descriptive vocabulary and images. "My Pepsi beats my thirst. Sandcastle forts shooting arrows;" "A student snoring, drilling dreams into his desk." Each succeeding poem improved upon itself and pride and accomplishment were expressed. Fancy creativity emerged, smiles widened, but the voluntary contributions and the addition of students' own but unsolicited artwork proved there had been a 'Click!' (Mary Berguin, personal email, Feb. 2010)

Findings

Question 1: Do Emirati students perceive creative writing in English as motivational in their English studies?

In the survey, students were asked if they found creative writing to be a motivational experience. Of the fourteen who responded to the question, ten responded in the affirmative. When asked if the experience of writing creatively would encourage them to read more English or Arabic literature and poetry, ten out of the fifteen respondents indicated that it did encourage them and that they would read more literature.

Question 2: Does creative writing in English encourage Emirati students to write in English beyond the classroom?

When surveyed, all but one of the respondents replied that they would continue to write in English. Further, each of those surveyed felt that creative writing had helped to improve his written English. Asked if they would share their creative work with others, eleven of the respondents stated in the affirmative. When asked how they would go about accomplishing this

sharing, some spoke of sharing their work with friends. One respondent explained, “We will do it as a group... and we can share.” When asked what activities in the class were the most helpful in making this improvement, one respondent discussed the different types of “formats” that were introduced and which helped to improve his writing and vocabulary. Another respondent stated that the process of writing something every day was beneficial.

Question 3: *Does creative writing in English motivate Emirati EFL students to be better users of English?*

In the survey, respondents were invited to offer an opinion about whether creative writing motivates someone to become a better user of English. In response one student explained that it was motivating in that it offered the chance to “explore more words and formats.” Another said that it gave him more “confidence in [himself].” Of the ten respondents, eight made positive remarks, with one stating that he did not know, and one saying that he felt he was not ready for creative writing.

When survey questions focused on individual language skills, the responses emphasized the benefits that accrued due to creative writing. The students were asked if creative writing had improved their reading comprehension. All the respondents felt that it had improved their English reading comprehension. When asked if the course had improved their understanding of literature and poetry, six said ‘yes,’ eight said it had ‘somewhat,’ and only one said that it had not helped.

Thirteen of the respondents felt that creative writing had improved their public speaking skills. As the normal procedure in the class was for students to verbally share their creative work with classmates, this encouraged them to work on such issues as eye contact, pronunciation, tone and pacing. This was complemented by the preparation for, and participation in, the Poetry Slam.

Finally, when asked if they would recommend creative writing to other students to help them improve their English, thirteen of fourteen responded that they would recommend it to their fellow students. When queried about the benefits of having creative writing as part of an English course, two of the respondents mentioned that it improved their skills; one mentioned that it improved his thinking, and two others alluded to social benefits, in that it would “help you in life,” and that it “keep[s] me comfortable while I am talking to people.”

Examples of Creative Writing Assignments

The researcher conducted several creative writing lessons throughout the term with each of the surveyed classes. The first creative writing assignment was also the opening assignment of the class. The assignment is a five-staged activity where the student is asked to create (1) an acrostic poem using their name as the starting point, (2) respond to three reflective questions, (3) exchange papers with a student and then respond to three prompts for descriptions of the student, (4) exchange the paper with one more student and then write a paragraph description of the paper’s owner, and (5) return the assignment back to the original owner so each student could write a poem about himself using all the information available from the first four parts of the assignment. Examples of student responses to some of the sections are shown below:

Stage 1: The Acrostic Poem

- M – *Manly and into sports*
- A – *Able to do many things at once*
- R – *Relieved to get into college*
- W – *Waleed is my best friend for all time*
- A – *Argumentative about sports teams*
- N – *Nervous about examinations*

Stage 2: Reflective Questions

1. If you could be an animal, what animal would you be?
Answer: A falcon.
2. If you could be a color, what color would you be?
Answer: Blue.
3. If you could be a child's toy, what toy would you be?
Answer: A toy airplane.

Stage 3: Descriptions

1. How would a blind person describe this individual?
He talks loudly and too quickly. He snores in class. He has a loud car.
2. How would a deaf person describe this individual?
He is skinny and doesn't eat anything. He always wears sunglasses. He likes baseball caps.
3. How would a three year old child describe this individual?
He is scary because I cannot see his eyes. He never gives me candy. Maybe he is nice, maybe he is not. I want my mom.

A Poem of Myself

Another creative writing activity offered here is the Poem of Myself where students used cues to create a poem. Following is a transcription of one student's poem:

| Cues | Student Response |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Line 1: Your first name | <i>Waleed</i> |
| Line 2: Four traits that describe you | <i>Easy going, friendly, lazy, and happy</i> |
| Line 3: Relative of... | <i>Four brothers and two sisters</i> |
| Line 4: Lover of... (hobbies or ideas) | <i>Jet skiing, driving, and dune bashing</i> |
| Line 5: Who feels... (2 responses) | <i>Unhappy about homework and the progress test</i> |
| Line 6: Who needs... (3 responses) | <i>Red Bull, a fast car, and a new alarm clock</i> |
| Line 7: Who gives... (3 responses) | <i>Advice to my younger brothers, money to them, and help to my friends</i> |
| Line 8: Who fears... (3 responses) | <i>Not passing the class, losing my sunglasses, and Ahmed!</i> |
| Line 9: Who would like to see... (3 responses) | <i>The beach open again, sky diving, and desert sunsets</i> |
| Line 10: Resident of... (city, village, town, state, country, planet, etc.) | <i>Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, Earth</i> |

These examples gleaned from many offer some indication of the students' attitudes and aptitudes for creative writing.

The Poetry Slam

A Poetry Slam is a poetry competition where poets share their work with other poets and interested audience members. The first Poetry Slam was held in Chicago, in the United States, in 1984. It was organized by Marc Smith, a poet and construction worker, with the idea of bringing poetry and the power of personal expression into the mainstream of community life. In 1986, the Poetry Slam moved to its permanent Chicago home at the Green Mill Jazz Club. In 1990, the first National Poetry Slam took place in San Francisco, with teams of poets from across the USA. Since its beginnings in Chicago twenty-five years ago there have been Poetry Slam events in numerous other countries including Germany, UK, Switzerland, France, Sweden, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Madagascar, and Singapore (Smith, n.d.).

Though a competition, the Abu Dhabi event was organized to provide students with the opportunity to read their poems aloud in front of teachers and peers rather than as a fiercely competitive occasion. Awards were given for *Best Dressed Poet*, *Most Imagery in a Poem*, *Funniest Poem*, *Best Delivery*, *Most Eye Contact with the Audience*, and the *Best of Show*. Though any student who wished to participate was free to do so, the majority of the participants came from two Higher Diploma Foundations classes.

All those who read poems were invited to submit their work for inclusion in a locally published anthology, *The Sundial Poets: The collected works of the 1st ADMC Poetry Slam* (Dougherty, 2009). A total of twenty-three students submitted work to the anthology. The book was launched and a reception was held in which students were able to autograph each other's copy of the anthology and have pictures taken. Copies of the anthology have been given as gifts to college personnel and have also been put on permanent display in the college library. Three poems that won awards are shown below. These are well-polished and edited works, and it is important to realize that they went through several stages of peer and teacher editing before being submitted for inclusion in the anthology.

Winner of the Best of Show category:

To the Sea and Love

by Saif Abdulla Salem Mohamed Al Qaydi

My life destroyed once
When love disappeared
When I think of that love
My eyes throw down tears
How many times have I spoken to my soul?
Tried to make myself happy but still sad?
So I believe I must go to the sea and step again into love

Winner of the Best Imagery category:

JOB

by the combined students of Higher Diploma Foundations class CQF

Students sleeping like bears, hibernating the whole year
Students chatting with young girls, beautiful girls, unknown girls
Laptops clicking
Mohamed Shams snoring like a bear, drilling dreams in his desk
Students whispering Arabic, shouting crossfire corner to corner

Teacher screaming
"Give me a Break" "Give me a Break" "Give me a Break"
Gucci perfume covering Big Tasty and smelly carpet
Nervous about exams, nervous about marks, nervous about attendance
Slowly in class
Quickly out the door

Winner of the Funniest Poem category:

Bald spot

by Saif Ahmed Saif Alqasab Al Suwaidi

I want a bald spot
Nice and shiny in the sun
If you pour water on my bald spot
It will sprout mint

One of the teachers who had her students write poetry in her English class, and who encouraged them to read their work at the Poetry Slam, had this to say about the experience from the teaching standpoint:

It was a reward for a teacher to see from what depths one could push from beyond "No" to students working autonomously and taking themselves to places they hadn't been. It was the pride in taking themselves there, hopefully to a place they will want to revisit, that will be their reward. (Mary Berguin, personal email, Feb. 2010).

Conclusion

One goal of the researcher is to show that creative writing is a valuable instructional tool in the ESL or EFL classroom. Although creative writing is often considered the domain of the native speaker the researcher believes that creative writing has many positive benefits for the EFL or ESL student. The research data gave clear answers. To reiterate, there were three research questions asked in this part of the case study: (1) do Emirati students perceive creative writing in English as motivational in their English studies, (2) does creative writing in English encourage students to write in English outside of the classroom, and (3) does creative writing in English motivate EFL students to be better users of English? Each question may be answered in the affirmative, supported by the data from the Internet survey and anecdotally via the response to the Poetry Slam and the submissions to the Poetry Slam anthology, *The Sundial Poets: The collected works of the 1st ADMC Poetry Slam* (Dougherty, 2009).

The answers to these questions are important for they suggest that creative writing can be used more widely in EFL and ESL. If non-native speakers of English identify creative writing to be beneficial and motivational for their second language acquisition, then it would behoove administrators and teachers of EFL and ESL programs to include creative writing courses, or elements of creative writing at the least, in their curricula. In the United Arab Emirates, and working with students here, a teacher should be reminded of Wilfred Thesiger's observation (1994, p. 79), "When moved, Arabs break easily into poetry." This proved the case at the college, and even when the medium was English.

References

- Dörnyei, Z. (2001a). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2001b). *Teaching and researching motivation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Dougherty, P. (2007). Creative writing and target language acquisition: Student perceptions from Bangladesh. *Research Reports, the University of Hyogo School of Human Science and Environment*, 9, 119-131.
- Dougherty, P. (Ed.). (2009). *The sundial poets: The collected works of the 1st ADMC Poetry Slam*. Abu Dhabi: Higher Diploma Foundations at Abu Dhabi Men's College.
- Dougherty, P., & Dougherty, A. (2008). Creative writing and EFL motivation: A case study. In K. Bradford-Watts (Ed.), *JALT2007 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.
- Gardner, R. C., & Lambert, W. E. (1959). Motivational variables in second language acquisition. *Canadian Journal of Psychology*, 13(4), 266-272.
- Guilloteaux, M. (2007). *Motivating language learners: A classroom-oriented investigation of teachers' motivational practices and students' motivation*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Nottingham, 2007. Retrieved March 8, 2010 from http://etheses.nottingham.ac.uk/271/1/Guilloteaux_PhD.pdf
- Smith, M. K. (n.d.). Marc Smith ("So what!"): Founder of the Poetry Slam. Retrieved March 9, 2010, from <http://marckellysmith.com/#/history/>
- Thesiger, W. (1994). *Arabian sands*. Dubai: Motivate Publishing.

Appendix A

Questions from the anonymous survey.

1. Are you going to continue writing in English?
2. Has creative writing helped to improve your English language writing?
3. Has creative writing improved your English language reading comprehension?
4. Has creative writing helped to improve your English language vocabulary?
5. Has creative writing helped improve your skills in public speaking?
6. Regarding language, which type of a school did you attend in elementary (primary) school, English Medium or Arabic Medium?
7. Regarding language, which type of a school did you attend in secondary school?
8. Would you recommend creative writing to other students to help them improve their English?
9. Did you find creative writing to be a motivational experience for you?
10. Do you think creative writing should be offered as part of a normal university/college education?
11. How would you rate your spoken English?
12. How would you rate your written English?
13. Did peer editing help you to improve your own writing?
14. As a result of the class will you read more English language literature and poetry?
15. As a result of the class will you read more Arabic language literature and poetry?
16. Has the course improved your understanding of literature and poetry?
17. Rate the quality of the creative writing class on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being "excellent" and 5 being "poor."
18. Which activities in the class were the most important in respect to improving your writing skills?
19. If you decide to share your creative work with others, how will you do so?
20. In what ways did the teaching style help you (or not help you) in the course?
21. What changes would you suggest to make the course better?
22. What do you see as the benefits of having creative writing as part of an English course?
23. What is your major at college?

24. If you are a full-time college student, what profession or career do you intend to enter into?
25. After taking this course you can offer a justified opinion on this question: Does creative writing motivate someone to become a better “user” of English? Yes, no, and why?
26. Have you ever had your creative work published or presented in a public setting, newspaper, magazine, etc.? If so, please give some details.
27. Did the Poetry Slam/sharing your poems improve your English listening skills?
28. If you feel that your listening skills were improved, in what way were they improved, or, which activities helped to improve them?

Appendix B

Peer Editing and Review Sheet

This is a _____ titled _____ by _____

1. Summarize the work in one sentence: _____
2. Finish the statement – The things I liked best were... _____
3. Finish the statement – The things I would like to know more about were... _____

4. If I had written this work, I would be at first annoyed, but later appreciate knowing that it needed _____ at the part where _____
5. Now proofread the work for mechanical errors using symbols from the peer review sheet and refer to these 10 Guidelines for Effective Writing (*adapted from The Creative Writing Handbook*, Amberg & Larson, 1992, pp. 127-133).

1. Be clear.
2. Use the active voice.
3. Cut unnecessary words.
4. Use the right words.
5. Combine choppy sentences.
6. Do not confuse similar words.
7. Avoid fragments and run-on sentences.
8. Match subjects and verbs.
9. Use adjectives and adverbs correctly.
10. Spell correctly.

