Creative Writing and Vocabulary Acquisition: A Study of Emirati College Students

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No people in the world manifest such enthusiastic admiration for literary expression and are so moved by the word, spoken or written, as the Arabs… The rhythm, the rhyme, the music, produce on them the effect of what they call 'lawful magic' (sihr halal).

(Hitti, 1956, p. 90)

Does creative writing improve vocabulary acquisition? A 2009 case study exploring creative writing and Emirati student motivation had one survey question that asked students whether or not creative writing in English improved their English language vocabulary. The response was 93% in the affirmative (Dougherty, 2010). This supported earlier studies conducted in Bangladesh where English as a foreign language (EFL) students overwhelmingly identified creative writing as having a beneficial impact on their English vocabulary acquisition (Dougherty, 2007; Dougherty & Dougherty, 2008). These studies explored the motivational impact of creative writing in English for the EFL student and only dealt with vocabulary acquisition tangentially. Therefore, it was of interest to the researcher to conduct another study to specifically examine the impact that creative writing had on Emirati EFL students' vocabulary acquisition. It addressed this main research question: Do Emirati college students perceive that creative writing in English improved their English language vocabulary acquisition?

Researchers have generally accepted that vocabulary acquisition is a key to developing communicative competence in a second language (Carter, 1998; Browne, 2003). Achieving communicative competence is critical for the Emirati EFL student in that the pursuit of tertiary education in the United Arab Emirates requires, in most cases, that the student study in English medium institutions. It is estimated by Wakely (2010) that a vocabulary sufficient for study in an English medium university program is between 5,000 and 10,000 words, or lexical units, and so the task of improving the scope and depth of vocabulary acquisition is of major importance in the Emirati educational context. This paper examines one possible avenue to encourage and enable students in the United Arab Emirates to improve their English language vocabularies: using English in the task of self-expression via creative writing.

The Case Study

The study was conducted at a college in Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates, with two classes of first year Bachelor of Applied Science students. One class was studying English Communication and the other was studying Academic Writing. Data were generated in a post study Internet survey and from two focus groups, as well as an examination of student creative output. The researcher was the instructor for both classes.

The Survey

The survey was anonymous, on-line, in English, and had twenty questions and tasks. The expectation was that all respondents would use English to respond to each survey item and they did. Six questions were yes/no; five were free response; five were rating scales, and four were multiple select. Students were given the link for the survey at the end of the creative writing unit and were encouraged to complete the questionnaire and submit their answers after the instructor left the room. Students were told that the survey was voluntary and anonymous. Twenty-one of the students completed the survey and submitted their answers. This was approximately 57% of those who were eligible. The survey questions are contained in Appendix A.

The Focus Groups

There were two focus groups, one for the English Communication class and one for the Academic Writing class. The English Communication class had five members, all men, and

the focus group for the Academic Writing class had six members, two women and four men. The focus groups met either before or after class and averaged approximately twenty minutes of discussion. The researcher asked six questions (see Appendix B) and took notes of student responses. Respondents were encouraged to elaborate on their answers and were given the opportunity to go on topic-oriented tangents. All questions and all answers were given in English to accommodate the researcher's current lack of Arabic skills.

The Participants

The English Communication class was comprised of twenty-one male students and the Academic Writing class was comprised of fifteen men and two women. The English Communication students' major was Mechanical Engineering and the major for the Academic Writing class was Medical Laboratory Science. The average age of the two groups was in their lower 20s. As stated they were all in the first year of their Bachelor of Applied Science program, and all had either successfully completed a year of English Higher Foundations or tested out of the foundations year by passing the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) with a score of 6.0 and with each band score at or above 5.0, or a paper-based TOEFL score of 213, or a computer-based score of 80 (Higher Colleges of Technology, n.d.).

The Internet survey asked the respondents to give information about their prior schooling and their own perceptions of their English levels and writing skills. Question 14 asked students to identify what type of school their attended for secondary school, and 38% stated they went to an English medium school, 43% stated that they went to an Arabic medium school, and 19% responded that they attended a school with a bilingual curriculum, where English and Arabic were used as the languages of instruction.

Students were also asked to rate their English and Arabic reading and writing skills. Table 1 below shows their responses.

Table 1. Student ratings of their English and Arabic reading and writing abilities. (1 = excellent/5= poor)

	Arabic Reading	English Reading	Arabic Writing	English Writing
1	61.9%	14.3%	38.1%	10.0%
2	9.5%	33.3%	28.6%	30.0%
3	19.0%	47.6%	19.0%	60.0%
4	4.8%	4.8%	9.5%	0%
5	4.8%	0%	4.8%	0%

Anecdotally, in the course of the focus group meetings, when asked as an aside by the researcher whether or not they considered themselves, 'good' at English, most of the focus group participants indicated that, while they felt their listening and speaking skills were excellent, they could stand for some improvement in reading and writing. One participant put it this way, "I just don't know enough words."

The Integration of Creative Writing into the Curriculum

The curriculum for both English Communication and Academic Writing contain requirements for a writing portfolio. The assignments that comprised this study were incorporated in the

portfolio assessment. Students received credit for the creative writing assignments on a pass/ fail basis. There were four assignments: A Poem of Myself, the Three-Stage Introduction, the Five Senses Haiku, and A Digital Children's Story. The Poem of Myself and the Five Senses Haiku were completed individually, the Three-Stage Introduction required two students, and the Digital Children's Story was done in teams of three to five students. Each assignment was created by the researcher for the course and based on activities that had been used in prior studies (Dougherty, 2007, 2010; Dougherty & Dougherty, 2008), with the exception of the Digital Children's Story, which was introduced for the first time for this study. The assignments were incorporated into a packet that was titled, 'Creative Writing Project.' For each assignment, an example was given from prior courses or created by the researcher.

As a suggestion for those interested in integrating creative writing into their EFL or ESL courses, the offering of examples from both students and the instructor has been a key component in making the task of creative writing accessible and understandable for those students under the researcher's instruction. So, if an instructor intends to introduce creative writing, he or she should be willing to write and to be open to sharing the ensuing creative work with students. In the researcher's experience, most resistance to creative writing evaporates, or is mollified significantly, by offering the class teacher and/or student generated examples of what is being required. They see that the path has been trodden before, and by people they know or are like them, and then, usually, they are willing to try.

Findings

Regarding the central research question of whether Emirati students perceived that creative writing in English improved their English language vocabulary acquisition, the first question of the survey dealt directly with it, asking, "In your opinion, did the creative writing class activities increase your English language vocabulary?" All the respondents answered in the affirmative. This confirmed findings from the 2009 Emirati study that had a 94% affirmative response (Dougherty, 2010), and earlier studies in Bangladesh (Dougherty, 2007; Dougherty & Dougherty, 2008).

When asked to rate the statement, "Creative writing in English increases your English language vocabulary," from 1 to 5, with 1 being 'Strongly Agree' and 5 being 'Strongly Disagree,' 48% of the respondents rated it as a 1 or 2, 38% rated it at 3, and 14% rated it at a 4. This was backed up by responses to the focus group questions.

Asked, "Did the creative writing exercises improve your English vocabulary?" one respondent stated, "Yes, of course, by looking up words to help complete our digital story I learned new vocabulary." Another respondent stated, "I think, yes, as I had to find words to express myself." Another subject went on to explain that he had usually worked on vocabulary by writing down and memorizing words and phrases given to him by a teacher, but that writing a poem and writing a story forced him, "to find my own vocabulary." The survey respondents also weighed in on the discussion with one reflecting simply, "More writing… more words…"

Invited to offer what she felt was the best way to improve their English vocabulary, a focus group respondent stated that she thought reading and listening to English stories was the best for her vocabulary acquisition. She elaborated by saying that she learned new words by reading and watching her fellow students' poetry and digital stories. One of the survey respondents said that rewriting his stories helped him to learn new English words. Another respondent elaborated that, in his "opinion everything that happened in the class will help the student to know new words, like reading and writing, also the connection between the students and teacher and the student with his friends in the class."

When asked in the survey how creative writing had improved their English language writing, more than half of the respondents discussed how it helped them to learn new words. A selection of responses illustrates the point: "I learned new words and grammar…," "Because we learned more words that helped us to improve our language," and, simply, "Learn[ed] new words." Another student, reflecting more widely on the connection between creative writing and his or her improvement as a writer had this to say: "I think it helped me because to me I can write easily but arranging the ideas and putting them in the right place was a problem, and I am improving." These findings are consistent with the study (Dougherty, 2010), when 93% of the Emirati respondents answered 'Yes' when queried whether creative writing helped to improve their English language vocabulary. They also echo the general trend of creative writing being useful for vocabulary acquisition, as early studies from Bangladesh also indicated a positive impact on English vocabulary acquisition (Dougherty, 2007; Dougherty & Dougherty, 2008).

Examples of Student Creative Writing

What follows is a selection of student creative output. Each of the four creative writing exercises is represented. It is important to note that these are generally finished products, and have benefited from peer and instructor assistance in the editing process.

The Poem of Myself

The Poem of Myself was a decastich (a ten line poetry form), and the assignment asked students to respond to ten prompts or cues. What follows is an example from one of the students.

Table 2. Sample of student work.

Cues	Student Response
Line 1: Your first name...	*Mohammed*
Line 2: Four traits that describe you...	*Honest, strong, generous, ambitious*
Line 3: Relative of...	*Fifteen brothers and two sisters*
Line 4: Lover of (hobbies or ideas)...	*Football, watching T.V., swimming*
Line 5: Who feels...	*Mostly happy, sometimes tired*
Line 6: Who needs...	*Family, love, money*
Line 7: Who gives...	*Money, presents, safety*
Line 8: Who fears...	*Animals, failure, death*
Line 9: Who would like to see...	*Parachuting and camel racing*
Line 10: Resident of...	*Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Earth*

The Three-Stage Introduction

The Three-Stage Introduction was composed of an acrostic poem, three reflective questions, and a final stage in which the students exchanged papers and then gave three descriptions of their partners, with each description being from a different perspective. Below are student examples:

Stage 1: An acrostic poem

A – *An optimistic person*
B – *Bad too often*

D – *Doesn't do what he should*
U – *Uniquely Abdulla*
L – *Looking good all the time*
A – *Around all the time*

Stage 2: Thought questions

1. If you could be an animal what animal would you be?   *A crow*
2. If you could be a color, what color would you be?   *Lime*
3. If you could be a child's toy, what toy would you be?   *A toy race car*

Stage 3: Descriptions

1. **How would a blind person describe this individual?**
   Words: *loud, snore, scream*
   He is loud in class and he snores while sleeping. He screams when he is scared.

2. **How would a deaf person describe this individual?**
   Words: *muscular, thin, sunglasses*
   He is muscular when he touches his biceps. He is thin when he stands like wood. He wears expensive sunglasses.

3. **How would a three year old child describe this individual?**
   Words: *funny, furry, candy*
   He is funny when he farts. He is furry on his face. He is a lovely person when he gives me candy.

Five Senses Haiku

The next assignment was the Five Senses Haiku. It had three stages; the first two were brainstorming activities that built into the final activity of creating a haiku. For clarification, a haiku is a short poem, developed in 16th and 17th century Japan, which, in the English language convention, has three lines with five syllables for the first line, seven for the second, and five again for the final line. In the Japanese tradition these poems usually deal with nature or the seasons of the year (Whiteley, 2002). This attention to nature as a practice is not necessarily followed in modern haiku. Often the students followed the structural, syllabic format for the haiku but dealt with issues of self and personal experience or humor rather than nature. Accordingly, and very technically, these versions of poems would be known as *senryu* in Japanese, being of the same structural form as haiku but dealing with topics other than nature or the seasons (St Jacques, 1999). The researcher decided to keep the title of haiku as it had greater recognition among the students.

The first stage of the haiku assignment asked the students to respond to four prompts. The first prompt asked the aspiring poets to list five life events that they had experienced. Responses included such life events as the birth of a child, death of a parent or sibling, high school graduation, or marriage. The next prompt asked the students to list five places they would like to visit in the United Arab Emirates. Answers were varied but included such places as Ajman, Dubai, Fossil Rock, and the Empty Quarter. The third prompt asked the students to list the activities that they enjoyed playing or doing for leisure or recreation. Replies included everything from falconry to volleyball to talking with friends at a shisha café. The final prompt asked students to list five occasions when they had been scared or excited. Responses included being excited when receiving a driver's license, being scared in a first swimming lesson, being excited about getting married, and being scared when being alone in the desert with a flat tire.

The second stage of the haiku assignment asked the student to select one of the events, places, or activities, which he included in response to the prompts from the previous stage. The student was then to write several words or short phrases for each of the five senses: smell, touch, taste, sight, and hearing. Examples varied, but one of the best set of responses came from a student reflecting on a winter camping trip in the Liwa desert. He wrote for smell, "the smell of smoke from the fire," for touch, "cool sand between my fingers and toes," for sight, "a blue sky and, at night, falling stars," and for hearing, he wrote, "the sound of the wind."

After this students were exposed to the history and structure of haiku via several short Internet public access videos that featured Japanese language haiku, English translations, and original English versions of the form. One video was created by Tazuo Yamaguchi, who was the two-time winner of the United States National Haiku Championship, and it was used introduce the genre and explain the general history of the poetic form as well as offers some examples, both classical and modern, of the form (Yamaguchi, 2010). An abridged (and slightly censored) version of a haiku competition was shown to the students so they could witness more versions from the modern form of the genre (National Poetry Slam, n.d.)

Next, the researcher asked the students to look at their second stage papers, where they took one of their events, places, or activities, and wrote descriptive words or phrases for each of the five senses. The class was asked to offer one of the events or occasions to use as an example for a researcher-generated haiku. The researcher then led the students through the stages of creating a haiku using the topic and information from each of the categories for the five senses. This was typed onto a computer and displayed on the overhead. After qualifying that everyone understood the assignment and recognized the rules for creating a haiku, students were given time to write a haiku in class, with the understanding that their poems could be read aloud the following day before being submitted for grading.

There were numerous examples of haiku submitted and read by students. One that envisioned a stormy day and an unfortunate event went like this:

Thundering ahead
The dark horizon flashes
My tire is flat

A happier moment was captured in this poem:

Morning traffic jam
Clock ticking away my time
I make class at 8:00!

Each class had several students who were willing to read their poems aloud. Each class showed appreciation for the poet by applauding loudly after each performance. Students were also encouraged to contemplate reading their haikus in the college's yearly Poetry Slam event. The Poetry Slam at the college is a poetry competition where participants read original poems to an audience and a team of judges. The judges assign scores for each of the poems and winners for several categories are selected. The event at the college is not so much a competitive event as an event that simply offers students an opportunity to share their creative work (Dougherty, 2010).

Digital Children's Story

The final assignment in the Creative Writing Project was a team submission of a digital children's story. Teams were limited to two to three members and students were allowed to self-select

their teams. Students were given the choice of submitting their stories in PowerPoint or Prezi formats, though the classes felt more comfortable with PowerPoint. The stories had to be voice recorded as well as shown as text on the slides, and be four to five minutes in length when read. As a further qualification, the assignment stipulated that stories had a minimum of fifteen slides. The assignment was introduced to the students by the researcher via an example of an original digital story that exhibited all of the pertinent points of an acceptable assignment submission. Students were told that the story should be for elementary age children as a target audience. It was explained that each slide should include visual cues for the written content via photographs or drawings, and that the story had to either be completely original or an Emirati folktale translated into English and adapted to the modern day, with modern environments, circumstances, and characters. The first slide was to include the title of the story and the names of the team members. The final slide was to reference any pictures or drawings displayed in the work.

Each of the classes created several stories. One will be offered here as an example of student work, "Friendship without Borders." It told the story of two friends, Saif and Hilal and their teacher Hassan. The close friends are separated when Saif is sent to Kuwait for his education and Hilal goes on to become, like his father, a fisherman. The two friends separate physically, and then emotionally, as Saif returns and goes on to become an important businessman. The estrangement continues for many years until it is believed that Hilal is lost a sea. A few years after this, Hilal returns as a rich merchant. This surprise everyone as they thought he had died years ago. The two friends are reunited by their childhood teacher, Hassan, as part of the denouement. Figure 1 shows a selection of slides from the story:
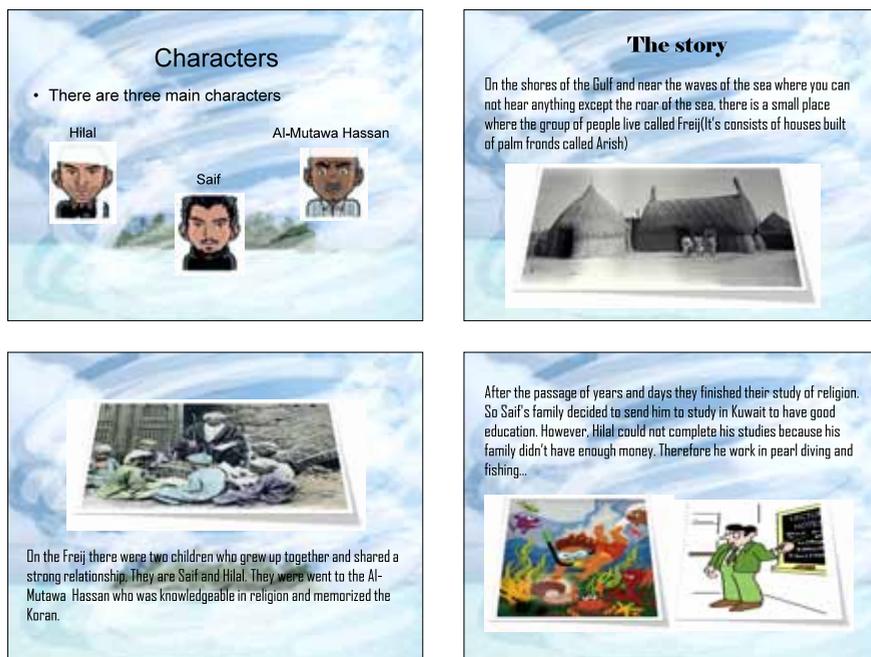

Figure 1. A selection of slides from the team's story.

As a culminating event for the Creative Writing Project, the instructor provided class time for the students to share their digital children's stories. The procedure had each student team come to the front of the room and introduce its story, offering details about the inspiration for the story's creation. The PowerPoint story was then projected, with sound, onto the whiteboard. The reaction

of each class towards the stories was generally very positive and supportive as evidenced by the laughter at humorous stories and the applause at the end of each 'performance.'

Conclusion

> *The sheer joy in the beauty and euphony of words, a characteristic of Arabic-speaking peoples, manifested itself…*

<div align="right">(Hitti, 1956, p. 559)</div>

This study explored the relationship between a student's impression of his or her own vocabulary acquisition and creative writing, focusing specifically on finding an answer to this research question: Do Emirati students perceive that creative writing in English improves their English language vocabulary acquisition? In the study, and in the case of both classes, students overwhelmingly responded via the online survey and focus group interviews that they found creative writing supported their efforts to improve their English language vocabulary.

Some teachers might ask whether the activities shown would be relevant to an academic course. Are there differences between creative writing and academic writing when we examine vocabulary acquisition? That is an area for more research, but it can be said that that these creative writing activities exhibit one more approach to encourage students to develop strategies for dealing with vocabulary. They may also serve as one more ready set of items in a teacher's toolbox.

In finishing this exploration into creative writing and English language acquisition, it is perhaps fitting to end with the words of one of the students. When asked in the survey how creative writing had helped to improve English language writing, a student wrote: "It was a new way. I like it because it's the first time for me to write a story in English; so it encouraged me to look for new words…"

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Appendix A

1. In your opinion, did the creative writing class activities increase your English language vocabulary?
2. If you answered yes, how many new words do you think you learned (you can refer to your New Word Diary)?
3. If you answered 100 or more, how many words do you think you learned?
4. If you answered no to Question 1 above, what other activities help you to learn new English words?
5. Regarding the creative writing assignments, what type of words did you learn?
6. Respond to this statement: Creative writing in English increases your English language vocabulary.
7. What examples of words did you learn through the creative writing activities?
8. Which type of creative writing did you enjoy the most?
9. Are you going to continue writing creative work in English?
10. Has creative writing helped to improve your English language writing?
11. If you responded yes to Question 10, how has creative writing improved your English language writing?
12. Has creative writing helped to improve your English reading comprehension?
13. Has creative writing helped to improve your skills in public speaking?
14. Regarding language, which type of school did you attend in secondary school?
15. Would you recommend creative writing to other students to help them improve their English?
16. How would you rate your English language writing ability?
17. How would you rate your Arabic writing ability?
18. How would you rate your English language reading ability?
19. How would you rate your Arabic language reading ability?
20. If you would like to add any comments about the creative writing in English experience, please do so here.

Appendix B

1. What is the best way for you to improve your English vocabulary?
2. What activities in class helped you improve your vocabulary?
3. Did the creative writing exercises improve your English vocabulary? If so, how; if not, why do you think they did not help?
4. What are some examples of words that you learned?
5. Do you think creative writing helps English vocabulary acquisition?
6. Would you recommend creative writing in English to another student who wants to improve his or her English vocabulary?