



From Creative to Critical Writing: Effects of Structured Instructions on Learners' Perceived Skills Development

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Abstract: This action research explores the effects of frequent impromptu creative writing activities on undergraduate ESL learners' perceptions about second language writing aptitude. It analyses how repeated and structured instructions on critical writing can impact learners' perceived writing skills development. The research was conducted using a pre-and post-evaluation design through a sixteen-week semester. Participants include 40 female and 16 male second-year first-semester students studying English as a major at a public university. Data were collected from pre and post focus group discussions and a small survey. Also, a survey questionnaire including both yes-no questions and demography has been used to gather learners' self-report. Focus group discussions include learners' perceptions about skills acquisition. Results show the learners who received the instructions are more confident and convinced about their writing competence than earlier. A considerable gender effect on perceived writing skills has also been detected. The conclusion calls for greater implementation of criticality in second language classrooms.

Keywords: Creative Writing, Critical Writing, Structured Instructions, Skills Development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite being a fundamental component of language, second language writing has been a significant obstacle to ESL learners (Cole & Feng, 2015) who blend thoughts and knowledge to create a unique meaning (Jones, Reutzel, & Fargo, 2010). Subsequently, these learners recognize writing skills as more complex than reading and listening (Berman & Cheng, 2010) and the majority of them is least proficient in it (Nesamalar, Saratha, & Teh, 2001).

ESL learners' negative beliefs about self-competence are a potential barrier to becoming proficient writers of English, which is more prominent in the upper-grade levels. These lead to self-doubt and anxiety, hindering writing proficiency achievements (Thomas, 1993). Such expectations of failure cause anxiety in writing about a specific topic and translating activity (Fu-Lan, 2006). Likewise, Elias, Akmaliah, and Mahyuddin (2005) state that repeated and unnecessary focuses on spelling and grammar errors instead of suggested content cause learner writing stress and frustration. Hence, MacGowan-Gilhooly's (1991) introduced the Fluency First Approach which prioritizes expressing thoughts compared to grammatical corrections in writing. Kasper and Petrello's (1998) teacher feedback is meant to decrease ESL learners' writing anxiety. Beaven's (1977) idea of sharing

and discussing experiences, thoughts, and additional information successfully reduced frustration and raised students' confidence. Teacher-student conferencing creates students' inquiries regarding the writing process or the product (Hyland 2000).

Instructors and peers' feedback on the writing tasks can be intimidating (Kasper & Petrello, 1998). Grammar rules are not the priority consideration in writing instructions as earlier in the 1970s (Mohammadi, Abidin, & Lai, 2012). Instead, creating a supportive environment for students to take risks in writing and expressing ideas spontaneously and non-conventionally helps (Shaughnessy, 1998). It suggests providing adequate time and frequent opportunities to practice writing in real life and develop the skill (Ismail, 2007).

Although it might not impact students' attitudes, experimental teaching increases students' writing skills and positively affects writing disposition (TOK & KANDEMİR, 2015). Students' creative writing skills increased with Parida, Rout, and Swain's (2017) six-week-long writing skill support strategies. Creative writing can also be an effective language learning tool in second and first medium instructions since learners like its influences on overall language competence (Akhter, 2014). Local research widely focuses on the general teaching writing approaches, strategies, experiences, and the limitations of the techniques used (Huda, Sureya,



Kamal, & Nafisa, 2011; Hasan, 2011). None of those emphasizes the changes in learners' attitudes and perceived skills development upon receiving specific instructions on creative or critical writing. Hence, this research attempts to perform the task currently excluded in the literature.

2. CRITICALITY IN ACADEMIC AND CREATIVE WRITING

Academic writing can be different in quality and features. Descriptive writing is the simplest literary discourse providing facts or information, including a summary, definition, or research report. Most academic writing, including university-level texts, is analytical and requires re-organizing facts and data into categories, parts, types, or relationships. Analytical writing includes analyzing, comparing, contrasting, relating, examining, etc., which needs planning. Persuasive writing refers to the discussion and conclusion part of an essay. It involves augmenting, recommending, interpreting findings, evaluating others' works, or taking a position. Writers convince the readers and validate their assumptions through directly relevant evidence utilizing both creativity and criticality.

Bringing criticality into different texts is, undoubtedly, an essential part of academic writing. Every academic writing task has definite purposes and questions to answer and convince the readers with correctness. Convincing requires persuading through presenting evidence, arguments, and reasons. Criticality helps assess the ideas and evidence, build a discussion, be skeptical, ask questions, identify patterns, look for bias, notice organizational flaws, and make a neutral and evidence-based judgment to ensure quality writing. Following Grice's (1975) maxims of Maxim of Quality (truthful arguments), Maxim of Quantity (as informative as necessary), Maxim of Relevance (staying focused on the topic), Maxim of Manner (avoiding obscurity and ambiguity, being brief and orderly) can ensure criticality. It incorporates researching information, evaluating the information quality, relevance of the examples, justifying the conclusions, etc.

Creativity refers to producing new and worthy ideas (Boden, 2001), which is close to writing skills (Demir, 2013). Writing involves creative thinking and connecting further information with prior knowledge to create a sense of the new information (Lawwill, 1999; cited in Demir, 2013). Creative writing is the study of writing (including poetry, fiction, drama, and creative non-fiction) and its contexts through innovative production and reflection on the process (Bennett, Clarke, Motion, & Naidoo, 2008). It is a medium for thought (Kroll, 2003) and includes resolving issues, spotting problems, and rethinking things already puzzled out and thus, improve ways of thinking. Improving creative writing often requires a massive number of exercises and practice (Bizzaro, 2003). Hence being attentive to lectures

dedicated to writing or doing grammar or vocabulary exercises is not actual writing (Pawliczak, 2015).

Creative writings can be considered as original compositions including different genres which are more contemporary and process-oriented. As a skill or ability, writing can be improved by learning through repetition, awareness of the writing process, and deploying appropriate teaching strategies that will improve students' writing abilities (Oberman & Kapka, 2001). Since skipping any of the writing processes of any stage can obstruct improving learners' creative thinking power (Parida, Rout, & Swain, 2017). Learning the writing process called competence enables students to express thoughts, knowledge, and feelings efficiently (Creswell, 2008; Smith, 2000). Imagination and originality are more meaningful than standardizing thoughts and truthfulness in creative writing. While assessing, students need space to construct the content and utilize cognitive skills freely (Brookes & Marshall, 2004). Creative writing has indispensable prerequisites, such as planning, organization, and discovering thoughts, which need to be appropriately original (Richards, 1990). Creative writing facilitators should provide sufficient opportunities to exercise higher-order thinking and a regular reading habit (Nasir et al., 2013).

Critical writing involves the evaluation and analysis of more than one source to develop an argument. Writers' assessment and investigation include identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the external evidence in each text, which connects critical reading, including text reliability, relevance, knowledge, and accuracy (Smith, 2019). Criticality is not meant to be merely negative or to disagree. Instead, it involves a profound reflection method focusing on an idea by unpacking its implicit assumptions and constructing a more extensive view "through distancing and recapitulation". Distancing from the text refers to being in between a reader and an author. Uncovering viewpoints and indications on a single idea can boost critical writing skills and deduce a better conclusion (Dixit, 2019). Critical thinking connects in writing through prosecuting and defending ideas, cross-examining the witnesses, summing up and considering theory, reaching an informed inference (Ramsden, 2003). Also, efficient critical writing requires prior analytic reading.

3. DESCRIPTIVE VS CRITICAL WRITING

The typical feature of descriptive writing is recounting something without looking beyond the story of what is there. Specific purposes of descriptive writing are generally stating a setting, explaining things, listing items, reporting an incident, detailing the key issues, summarizing an event, etc. Descriptive writing merely sets the background, represents the situation as it stands, and does not analyze or challenge the presented ideas. It is preferred for simplicity and used to pad out essays or assignments.



Descriptive writing creates a background discarding any analysis and discussion, although it sets the setting where an author can develop an argument. While providing description author presents information and report ideas instead of transforming and taking them forward to a conclusion. On the other hand, critical writers participate in an academic debate that is more challenging and uncertain. Criticality involves weighing up others' evidence and arguments, contributing writers' own. The key concerns in critical writing are ensuring the quality of the examples and ideas, identifying significant positive and negative aspects of those, assessing their relevance and usefulness to the discussion.

Critical writing includes all features of persuasive writing with two perspectives. An author argues for evaluating its merits and offers an alternative interpretation of the text. It includes critique, debate, disagreement, and evaluation. Critical writing engages authors in developing academic voices involving healthy scepticism, confidence, critical judgment, opinions, careful and fair assessment within a subject (ATAÇ, 2015). However, cynicism, cockiness, arrogance, dismissive, opinionated, random, prejudiced, and unreasoned assertions are not accepted in critical writing (Wellington et al., 2005 p.84). Critical writing involves learning how to present a compelling argument through reasoning and presenting evidence clearly, well-structured in all different writing formats (e.g., essay, report, dissertation, projects, etc.). Critical thinking in writing facilitates incorporating issues, framing thesis statements, clarifying arguments, using logical and relevant data as evidence to the main point, ensuring the quality of discussions, being specific about detail, etc. (Rohayati, 2017).

Critical writers reject any conclusions without assessing the given evidence and forming their arguments, which generates an academic debate. The author transforms information and constructs argument instead of reporting, pushing ideas forward, creating a line or thread of ideas from beginning to end. A critical discourse balances description and analysis (University of Leicester, 2013).

4. RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

I was assigned an advanced writing course teachable to 2nd year 1st semester students studying English Language and Literature. The course content consisted of creative writing elements, such as essays, dialogues, short stories, fiction and non-fiction, image captions, film reviews, book blurb, comics, etc. It was challenging for the beginner learners and me to succeed and achieve the intended learning outcomes (ILOs). However, I was determined to improve learners' overall writing skills that an advanced writing course is meant to do. The worldwide concern is that many adolescent learners do not develop competence in academic writing (Winson, 2015) needed to succeed in schools, workplaces, or social communications. However, insufficient school writing

time is the most common explanation for why youngsters do not write well (TOK & KANDEMİR, 2015).

Hence, I made them write anything from the syllabus daily, repeatedly, randomly, and frequently. The focus was on process writing, and I adopted a distinct approach. I explicitly taught the skills, processes, or knowledge and used scaffolding in developing students' writing skills (Paz & Graham, 2007). The method involved extensive chances for writing actual audiences, applying planning, reviewing concepts, taking ownership, interacting with peers, setting collaborative writing, etc. I also used individual assistance, self-reflection, evaluation, and personalized instruction in the teaching process. Skills development training comprised sentence combining skills, summarizing, organizing and structuring texts, etc. Five stages of strategy instructions, including brainstorming, planning, revising, and editing (Graham, 2007), have been provided. As part of scaffolding, I used pre-writing warm-ups and activities to help to generate or organize ideas for the compositions. The students would use an inquiry approach involving critical thinking practice and outlining ideas necessary to develop a specific genre. They learned to analyze primary and available data for argumentative and persuasive texts. To ensure procedural facilitation, I would provide external supports, such as prompts, guides, hints, or heuristics during different writing processes, including planning or revising. The learners had peer assistance in planning, drafting, editing the writings through group and paired discussion. Introductory class lectures included the study of models allowing students to examine a specimen of texts and patterns. I would assign them specific product goals for each written work they completed and ensure students received feedback and input from teachers and peers about the quality of writing.

As was expected, I observed changes in the learners' attitudes, reactions, approaches, confidence, and performances in four weeks. It was enjoyable and beneficial to witness the changes at every stage of the writing process and skills development (Nasir et al., 2013; Mak & Conium, 2008; Walker et al., 2005). Finally, I decided to investigate what changes the learners had experienced and how the specialized instructions could promote learning. This study analyses the difficulties of composition writing and strategies to improve students' creative writing abilities. The action research explores the necessity of teaching creative writing through criticality practice to develop advanced writing skills for ESL learners.

5. RESEARCH DESIGN

Methodology

I have used a survey and FGDs to study learner perceptions and experiences about the specialized instructions on applying criticality in ESL creative writing. It was primarily qualitative research requiring detailed data, though the yes-no question-answers have



promoted a quantitative analysis. Therefore, it was a mixed-method framework.

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants

The research respondents were 56 undergraduate ESL students studying at Jagannath University in Bangladesh. As English majors, the participants hold thirteen years of EFL and ESL writing experience equally. They were extensively informed about the proposed instructions, theories, and tools used in this research. Upon ethical clearance, student participants responded to the survey during the extended class periods. However, four incomplete responses were discarded from the analysis. Hence, the total sample of the study was following:

TABLE I. RESPONDENTS SAMPLE

Participants type	Total Number
Male	16
Female	40

Tools

As a pre-evaluation, the respondents participated in two FGDs separately to report their immediate reactions to any impromptu creative writing tasks and their perceived difficulties at the beginning of the semester. After sixteen weeks of a complete semester, they responded to an original questionnaire comprising five yes-no questions and two demographic items about the changes in their attitudes and beliefs. Also, they participated in the post-instructions FGDs, each consisting of 28 students. The discussion focused on learners' experiences of the specialized teaching on using criticality to creative writing and the changes in attitudes towards impromptu writing improved writing competence. A few relevant probing questions were used to seek in-depth information regarding learner reactions and expectations.

Analysis

Data collected for the inquiry were analyzed manually at two stages by using statistical and descriptive analysis. The quantitative (Yes-No questions) and qualitative data (the short answers) drawn from the FGDs have been analyzed. Quantitative data include the number of respondents who were anxious about impromptu writing tasks and have recently experienced changes throughout the course to improve writing confidence. At first, participants' demographic information was sought to ensure they possess an equal length of ESL learning and writing experiences. Next, qualitative content collected on pre-and post-instruction individual attitudes to impromptu and creative writing tasks were analyzed descriptively using ground theory to support the conclusions drawn from statistical findings. Both

inductive and deductive processes were needed, and the data were interpreted using patterns, themes, and categories that surfaced from data.

6. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Quantitative Analysis:

In response to the question "Does different creative writing practices in this course help to improve your overall writing skills?", 92.9% of learners respond positively, although 7.1% of them are not sure about the effect. Most significantly, none of the respondents finds it useless as a learning writing mode. However, neither gender nor grade has an impact on these perceptions.

TABLE II. GENDER EFFECTS ON THE PERCEIVED USEFULNESS OF CRITICAL WRITING PRACTICES ($P < 0.05$)

Gender	N	p-value	t-value	95% CI
Male	9	0.3729	-0.898	(-0.5500, 0.2096)
Female	47			

TABLE III. GRADE EFFECTS ON THE PERCEIVED USEFULNESS OF CRITICAL WRITING PRACTICES ($P < 0.05$)

Grades	N	p-value	t-value	95% CI
Good	4	0.5731	-0.567	(-0.6979, 0.3902)
Bad	52			

A great majority of 91% of participants agreed that they have different reactions to any impromptu writing tasks than earlier. On the other hand, only 3.6% of respondents have no feelings or attitudes towards such creative writing tasks. And 5.3% of them are unsure about the changes or improved attitudes. Around sixty-six percent of respondents have fewer difficulties in planning and organizing writing tasks. They think more critically.

Around sixty-eight (67.86%) percent of the participants believe L2 writing is less complicated than the other L2 skills now, whereas 25% of respondents believe planning or initiating writing tasks is no easier now. Learners are surer about writing as the least difficult skill now, and none of them is unsure, while 84% of participants report the skills were not so trouble-free earlier.

Findings show gender does not affect ($p = 0.34 > 0.05$) learners' perceived writing skills development after rigorous impromptu critical writing activities. However, female learners are more confident in approaching writing assignments than male learners ($p = 0.01 < 0.05$).



TABLE IV. GENDER EFFECTS ON THE PERCEIVED USEFULNESS OF CRITICAL WRITING PRACTICES ($P < 0.05$)

Items	p-value	t-value	95% CI
1. Reassurance	0.1640	-1.411	(-0.4842, -0.0842)
2. Confidence	0.0185*	-2.423	(-0.09584, -0.0916)
3. Organization	0.9494	0.064	(-0.3802, 0.4052)
4. Criticality	0.3070	1.031	(-0.2124, 0.6624)
5. Ease	0.1538	1.446	(-0.0579, 0.3579)

* $p < 0.05$

However, the grade has no statistical correlation with the perceived usefulness of impromptu critical writing practices. All five hypotheses have been rejected without any exceptions.

TABLE V. GRADE EFFECTS ON PERCEIVED SKILLS DEVELOPMENT ($P < 0.05$)

Items	p-value	t-value	95% CI
1. Reassurance	0.4938	-0.689	(-0.6133, 0.2996)
2. Confidence	0.1256	-1.556	(-1.2566, 0.1586)
3. Organization	0.9199	-0.101	(-0.6535, 0.5908)
4. Criticality	0.8403	-0.203	(-0.7694, 0.6282)
5. Ease	0.3478	0.348	(-0.4889, 0.1752)

Qualitative Analysis:

Generally, the participants feel more constructive about any given writing task and are less threatened with the challenges of completing the tasks. Writings are well informed now. The learners report that thoughts are expressed more clearly and easily compared to the earlier times. They can think structurally and organize them as a text in a step-by-step fashion.

In response to the question "How do the creative and critical writing practices in this course help to improve your overall writing skills?", the participants were very optimistic and determined:

"Now I have learned many things about creative writing and how to organize content beautifully, although I need more practice, and I will go for it"

The learners are excited to learn about different creative writing genres and employ critical approaches in developing the content. Many of them were hardly known. Besides raising criticality and confidence in the learners, the instructions have increased their creative skills::

"The course has broadened my thinking process and problem-solving abilities."

A. Pre-instruction deficiencies

While approaching an impromptu writing task, learners would feel nervous, tense, disturbed, shy, hesitant, unconfident, confused, and scared:

"I used to panic about creative writing; it helps me overcome my nervousness."

Overall, the learners were considerably frustrated about grammar skills and confused about using grammatically correct sentences. Many of them were extremely worried about structuring and organizing the given tasks:

"But now I am quite confident to be able to write any paragraph, essay or story based on some logical ideas which I have learned in this course. Until I started practicing this course, most often I would write everything after memorizing."

It was challenging to decide what to write since they had not been exercising brainstorming previously. They were not aware of searching relevant and essential ideas systematically at the pre-writing stage:

"At least, I won't sit idle after getting a topic."

Developing arguments and reasoning was a significant problem for the learners because of not knowing about criticality and practicing critical thinking. Having no clear concepts regarding the differences among background, story, explanation, and analysis, they would develop inappropriate content for the given writing tasks. Being less confident about creating content and structuring texts, they would memorize essays and paragraphs:

"It was getting problematic as I was inept at organizing simple writing, which was a big obstacle to doing well in exams. What to write and how to write is almost clear now. I have known the importance of planning before writing, which is helpful."

Consequently, the respondents used to focus on surface learning, meaning, and grammar while writing. However, they would always feel the necessity of improving all the writing sub-skills to meet expectations.

"Before attending this course called Advanced Writing, creative writing was like a bad idea to me. At the beginning of the course, I failed to write any topic fluently, but I had confidence. Day by day, it is improving. I have learned so many topics like writing paragraphs, essays, captions, advertisements, short stories, etc., and these helped me to write many words on any topic."

B. Changes in-between

In the class, the respondents reported they could not complete the first impromptu task, which was an essay on



'Books vs. Internet'. The write-up was neither critical. However, the worst difficulty was with organizing and developing the texts. Most of them were unclear about the details and had little knowledge of the basics and structure. Hence the task was frightful, and planning was intricate since they would often not practice pre-writing. However, they can complete the last job and find it less difficult now:

"Critical writing develops my creative thoughts, broadens my thought process and problem-solving abilities. I can use my imagination and suggest alternatives. It improves my logical skill; now I can write any items instantly."

The assigned tasks are not as scary as it was earlier to them. Practising criticality helps learners to enhance creativity and increase content knowledge. It broadens their imagination and allows giving importance to their thoughts:

"Now, I don't feel scared to start any writing; I can quickly decide what I should include in my writing by mind mapping. I am more confident about my writing, and now I know the actual process of writing. It has enhanced my free writing capability."

The best change observed is the learners' increased motivation for getting the task done compared to the first one. They are quick in planning and satisfied after writing. Also, they are more confident than earlier since revising and editing facilitates improvements.

"This course helps me to write in an organized way; I have learned from this course how to begin writing, brainstorm, manage time to understand the topic, care spelling, and review writing."

In addition, repeated impromptu practices help fight shyness and reduce nervousness to approach unseen writing topics and develop language skills, including vocabulary and syntax. A respondent stated:

"The instructions reinforce my problem-solving ability and logical thinking in diverse ways for different genres, including captioning images, writing fiction and non-fiction using an image, book blurb, advertisement, film review, etc. I can inquire into my capability and creativity! This course teaches me to keep time to perceive the topic, brainstorm, draft, care spelling, and review the text separately."

C. Post-instruction proficiencies

These ESL writers are no more worried about the subject matters of a writing task. They can initiate or continue writing on any given topic after receiving specialized instruction from the author. However, topic interest has no impact on Bangladeshi tertiary level learners' impromptu writing. Topic congruence matters (Saha, 2013) in their performance. But the respondents report knowledge about organizing writing can increase

concentration on creating actual content and argument instead of the right ones. Hence, they approach any writing task with similar exertion irrespective of the knowledge and interest in the topics. Understanding the writing prompts is much easier for them now:

"Creative writing practices made my imagination area growing vaster. They taught me various kinds of basic patterns of writings (e.g., paragraphs, essays, movie reviews, etc.). Now it is easy to decide sentences to be used in a specific area. Because of immense practice, my vocabulary is increased, and grammatical errors are reduced."

The most significant development reported by the respondents is experiencing ease in writing creatively and using various sentence structures, including different rare complex forms. Besides, they can write more paragraphs using a proper plan earlier than they received the instructions. Along with the growing concern about developing the text substance, the respondents reported reduced grammar concerns with fewer mistakes. They believe in having better word choices at the post-instructions phase. Now they use more relevant and appropriate vocabulary in the written texts.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Critical analysis involves avoiding unnecessary descriptions, interpreting evidence, and using counterarguments, etc. Critical writing focuses on the main points and adds the general background details or history for argument purposes. It explains how and why the evidence supports the main points. Sweeping generalizations are avoided. Specific arguments are measured, and specific examples or case studies are included. Comprising opposing viewpoints and reasoning strengthen arguments and explanations (University of Reading, 2016). Learning the critical writing rules, reading other people's work, re-reading self-work, creating writing groups, writing in detail can improve essential writing skills (Brenton, 2020). Utilizing cross-curricula, inter-disciplinary approach, and integrated teaching to enhance critical thinking among ESL writers is vital. Beyond traditional ESL instructions, adding other experiences is essential since tightly structured teaching limits thoughts while unstructured thoughts are rich, although messy (Pillai, 2020).

The respondents in this research reported some specific expectations from the instructors. These generate from the previous and current learning experiences. They believe teaching four primary stages, pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing, are essential to ensure a process approach to writing. Focusing on the product approach is often judgmental about learners' ability and less supportive of their learning process. Brainstorming and pre-writing are vital for organizing the ideas while revising and editing raise awareness of errors and development. Explicit teaching of summarizing and



organizing specific types of text can be helpful in patterning. Besides, scaffolding students' writing can be eye-opening about mistakes and expansion. Peer assistance and peer assessment are less demanding than teacher evaluation. Also, teaching how to write a thesis statement and topic sentence can help draft structured paragraphs and lead to a logical conclusion. In addition, teaching uncommon complex and compound structures or phrases and idioms is essential. Teaching how to avoid run-on sentences or fragments is necessary to improve sentence and text quality. Learners need to know that less is more. They must practice word economizing and less nominalization to ensure text clarity. Participants also emphasize encouraging learners to write opinions and analyze a topic, which can awaken critical writing. Critical thinking should be practiced as well. They expect brainstorming, criticality practices, and repeated attempts to master creative and critical writing skills to address various topics. Some specific techniques, including frequent competitive writing, critical thinking, in-depth research, multi-modality, etc. can be used (Dixit, 2019).

Overall, improving critical writing skills involves competitive essay writing, frequent critical reading, intensively topic searching, technology use etc. The respondents also reported the positive effects of similar activities. However, a larger sample and a longitudinal or experimental study would find more dynamic results of the instructional products.

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