

# 創られた創造性のはざま

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## Among Created Creativities: How I Became a Student of Creativity

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I was born in Japan in 1978. Inappropriate as it may seem at the start of an academic paper, things take on a different aspect when the research is deeply concerned with the writer himself. While many fields of science value the virtue of objectivity, it is not necessarily a universal truth uncritically acknowledged throughout the whole academic world, and educational research is just one example.

In the academic field of second language teaching/learning (especially after the 1990s) there has been a tendency to promote research conducted not by outsiders but by the teacher, or one of the obviously most influential participants in what is happening in the classrooms. Those leading this movement, supported by increasing criticism of the discrepancies between theory and practice (e.g. Prabhu 1990; Clarke 1994; Brumfit 1995), have put forth arguments for such forms of teacher-initiated research as 'reflective language teaching' and 'action research' (Allwright and Bailey 1991; Wallace 1991; Richards and Lockhart 1994; Farrell 2007). Presented in this short paper is part of my approach to reflective language teaching, which is based on the concept of 'creativity'. Each of the following sections describes my reflection related to my teaching practice: keeping in view both historical and geographical axes, the descriptions aim to clarify how a specific concept attracted the attention of me as one specific Japanese learner, teacher and researcher of the English language.

### 1. Experiences

#### 1.1. On the 'wrong' side

I was born in 1978, in a small Japanese town located far from Tokyo on the opposite side of Japan's central mountain range. This is merely a geographical fact and thus usually means nothing more than that; however, I must admit that its potential symbolism appears too perfect to prevent its metaphorical extension. In fact, throughout my childhood I tended to yield to a self-pitying dichotomy, considering our rural, boring and conservative side to be far behind Tokyo's metropolitan, exciting and progressive one. Now I do not believe in such a mythical distinction between 'right' and 'wrong' sides any

more; nevertheless, for the present purpose of characterising my experience of my childhood, this dualism would seem to serve at least as a rough-and-ready overview of the whole story.

My experiences learning English were no exception to this principle. In recent decades traditional Japanese methods of English teaching have been the target of scathing criticism, with many caricatured images of English classrooms presented as objects for condemnation. I suppose they may not even be 'caricatured', for they were often part of my real experience since 1991 when I started learning English in public junior high school. I was taught in a collectivistic classroom with usually around forty students; there was no more important motivation than preparation for different kinds of examinations, including both smaller ones for school records and much more important ones for admission to senior high schools. As one of the logical consequences of this, both teachers and learners tended to emphasise what was most likely to be required for such examinations: lexical and grammatical knowledge, reading and translation skill and a minimum of listening comprehension ability.

At that time there could never have been any reason for me to question these customary practices: all the more so, due to the fact that they perfectly met our academic needs. In hindsight, however, the teachers themselves might have felt professionally conflicted over whether to stay on the same traditional track: in 1989 the Japanese Ministry of Education (*Monbu-sho*, now reorganised as *Monbu-kagakusho*, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) had published their revised guidelines for foreign language teaching, which explicitly declared a substantial shift in orientation to the then-burgeoning communicative language teaching. These guidelines began to be enforced in 1993, which means that my junior high school days corresponded to a marked transition period in English teaching in Japan (Sakui 2004; Nishino and Watanabe 2008).

Nevertheless, as far as my school was concerned, I do not believe the movement set into play by the central government had any immediate, noticeable influence on teachers' approaches. Whether this had anything to do with rural conservatism or not, I remember nothing more than a slight disappointment felt when I was given a copy of the revised textbook for third-year students: its size had been changed from its previous A5 size to a subtly larger B5, thus upsetting the 'order' established in my childish mind.

Even after going on to public senior high school, things remained virtually the same; or rather I actually experienced a much more conservative kind of English learning. My school had a firmly-established reputation for its education oriented towards entrance examinations for prestigious universities. Above all, English teaching was one of its significant constituents: regardless of the students' choice of the humanities or the sciences, there were only a few universities which did not include English in their requirements. Naturally there was a highly competitive atmosphere, in which students were always seeking for the reward of good marks. In spite of all the possible problems inherent in this learning environment, I believe I took full advantage of this traditional system of intensive training and thus laid the groundwork for my later improvement in English proficiency. Also important for me was that the rapid development promoted in this forcible fashion made it possible to gain some intellectual satisfaction through learning English: no longer did I encounter the childish contents which had given intolerable humiliation to an adolescent boy; on the contrary, I remember always having to grapple with lexically and grammatically challenging English texts, in which I found

no trace of excessive simplifications (although in retrospect, there must have been some).

It was not until then that I became more interested in English than in any other subject. Whether this interest could be termed intrinsic motivation or not, I imagine it probably had a favourable effect on my learning.

## 1.2. A country bumpkin in Tokyo

Fortunately, in 1997 I was admitted to a national university in Tokyo. For a naïve country boy, this meant much more than just a personal achievement for hard work: it was a glorious escape from the 'wrong' side, towards the eldorado of my long-cherished dreams. I had become quite confident with respect to my English proficiency, as I had succeeded in passing one of the toughest entrance examinations in Japan. On the other hand, however, I was still deeply aware of an undeniable weakness: there was an imbalance in my knowledge and skill, which I felt prevented me from going beyond applying grammatical rules to my reading materials. I now suppose this was likely the case for other Japanese students also, but at that time, I tended to ascribe my problem to the general backwardness of my home town. I expected that my imperfections could only be remedied by some elixir, hidden somewhere in metropolitan Tokyo.

I reached the conclusion that, for improving my speaking, listening and writing skills, I should force myself to take challenging courses taught by native speakers, because before coming to Tokyo, it had been very difficult to have sufficient contact with them. In retrospect, I probably made the right choice; these courses gave me the impression that I was doing something novel and different, which was satisfying in itself. However, at the same time, what I experienced was not so much stimulation as frustration: unfortunately, I have no clear memories of what I learned in those courses, perhaps because I was not at a stage where I could benefit from them. Instead I remember that in the end I often resigned myself to just accepting my fate, as a non-native speaker. It was not that I made no progress; I was simply overwhelmed by the fact that, regardless of any progress made, there remained too long a way ahead towards native-like fluency, pronunciation and 'feel' for the language, which all seemed inaccessible to me. What was worse, after passing the entrance examination I had not kept my motivation strong enough to overcome these feelings of incapacity, and began to search for something else which would more easily nurse my wounded pride and self-confidence.

For all my disappointment with myself, my courage was still insufficient to change course, and I therefore continued studying English mainly in self-defence. I suppose I was optimistically hoping that even a half-baked proficiency such as mine would be sufficient for teaching in secondary schools. Paradoxically, however, this less ambitious goal did not mean any less work: I had to begin collecting credits required for a teacher's certificate, which meant that my timetable was thereafter always filled with English-related courses. I do not regret this decision now, partly because this unexpected involvement in this second intensive training strengthened my reading skills (this was the first time I was assigned readings of about 150 pages a week). More significantly, however, these curricular requirements also invited me to experience many different aspects of studying English, one of which, creative English writing, held a special attraction for me, and since then has continued to powerfully motivate my learning.

### 1.3. Way out, way ahead

For a student planning to obtain a teacher's certificate, course descriptions for each new semester meant very little: since I was restricted by credit requirements, there was only a limited range of elective courses from which to choose. However, it was still a mild surprise to find, among other courses with familiar themes, an elective English course in 'creative writing' with the following description:

In this course a variety of short texts in English (including poetry) will be read and used as models for creative composition. The class will often include discussion by students (in pairs or groups) of texts or writing tasks. A short composition will be set each week.

There could have been no better timing: at that time I had become interested in writing poems and song lyrics in Japanese; and in addition, the quantity of my credit-oriented coursework had been giving rise to nearly unmanageable frustration, for which I needed some outlet. Although I had no confidence in my English writing, I hoped my personal interest in poetry might ease the difficulty of any challenging tasks.

Fortunately the results were favourable: throughout the course I worked on the assigned tasks of poetry writing without any feeling of forcing myself to. Even though I realised that I was not a good writer, still less a good poet (with an unimpressive B for the course), I still felt satisfied to have engaged myself for the first time in my life in English writing of any personal importance.

I must admit this course perhaps had no direct, immediate effect on the ability of my English writing. However, I cannot ignore its long-lasting effect on another aspect of my English learning: after taking that creative English writing course, I came to realise that there could always be an inherent pleasure and enjoyment to writing in English as a second language. (In fact I am trying to derive pleasure even from writing this paper, at the beginning of which, for example, I attempted a mischievous parody of a title well-known to Japanese students of English.<sup>1</sup> This demonstrates my inclination to play with the language; without this kind of enjoyment, writing in English for me would be just a hard, painful task, to be avoided when not absolutely necessary.)

Probably the biggest factor that directly contributed to improving my English writing seems to have been my later struggles to write my BA and MA theses. In the first place I could indeed have chosen a much easier option, that of writing them in my first language, Japanese. In this sense I believe that my initiation into creative English writing was also an initiation into a continuing apprenticeship in the English language.

## 2. Theoretical considerations

### 2.1. As a teacher/researcher

Because of my belief in the enjoyment I first experienced in the creative English writing course, after becoming an English teacher I did not hesitate to try a similar kind of teaching. This was not a simple reproduction of my experience; I added some necessary modifications to adapt the course to its context.

Although not everything was successful, fortunately there were often favourable reactions and results. This in itself was quite satisfying, but on the other hand I often felt that my teaching practice was based purely on a very fragile intuition; I realised that I could not give explicit reasons for why, how, when and even whether creative writing should be an effective way of teaching or learning English. This growing sense of the need for theoretical foundation was the starting point of all my present research.

In order to solve the problem I had posed to myself, I first searched the ELT literature for theoretical support for creative writing as a valuable method of teaching/learning English. The good news was that in this age of information technology it was not difficult to find people who had argued in favour of a relationship between creativity and second language writing. The bad news, however, was that although these writers each used the word 'creativity', their resulting arguments were subtly different from each other and worse, many of these were even incompatible with my own teaching practice. An issue here, obviously, was a lack of clarity inherent in 'creativity' itself.

## 2.2. Creativities created

As I was born in 1978, it might not be surprising that I was caught in a terminological trap: by the end of the 1970s the term 'creativity' (and its cognate forms) had started to be widely used in the field of language teaching, unfortunately with different writers attaching different values to it. The following extracts may give a cross-sectional overview of these periods:

In the case of writing teachers, poetry can provide a creative supplementary option to the more common, controlled structured writing class – one that gives students a welcome change of pace (i.e. away from a focus on language as form/grammar), and an opportunity to use the second or foreign language to compose and communicate in an original and imaginative way. (Preston 1982: 489)

[C]reativity in language learning refers to the human learner's predisposition to organize input in ways that exhibit a certain independence from external environmental characteristics. This aspect of language acquisition is believed to be rooted in innate and universal structural properties of the mind. (Dulay and Burt 1977: 99)

After all, much of the language we use in the real world is motivated by a desire for self-expression, as opposed to simply conveying information or 'getting things done'. Communicating subjective ideas, personal impressions, and imagined situations are creative activities, psychologically fulfilling and basic in much of human language use. We are not talking here of creative language in a 'literary' sense, but of verbal responses which are personal and imaginative in nature. (Baddock 1981: 230)

Needless to say, translating Japanese sentences written by someone else into English must to some extent be based on a highly sophisticated linguistic, cultural and social understanding of both languages. However, this process completely lacks the most fundamental and creative element of

language behaviour, which is the conveyance of the writer's own thoughts and ideas to others.  
(Ouchi 1979: 30; my translation)

The first example above is part of Preston's (1982) argument for the use of poetry writing in English language teaching (ELT). Although he does not offer a straightforward definition for the term 'creative', his understanding of it can still be seen in this short passage: he draws at least partially on the accepted definitions of poetry and fictional prose, whose distinctive features of 'creativity', 'originality' and 'imaginativeness' Preston finds beneficial in his teaching practice.<sup>2</sup>

This use is similar to that in 'Creative Writing' as an academic subject with a relatively short history (but an established place nevertheless) in American and British educational institutions (Monteith 1992; Pope 2005: 40). For the students to be creative in this sense is no easy task, not because of the supposed rarity of divine inspiration from the Muses, but rather because of the difficulty in obtaining favourable value judgements from outside: no text can be literarily original or imaginative without educated readers to compare it with something else. This is undoubtedly why this type of creativity has been a respected quality not only in the world of art and literature but also in education (although there might be some controversy over how to assess this kind of creativity).

However, in the language teaching literature it is rare to find 'creativity' used in this purely literary sense (even though the main topic may be related to poetry or fictional prose): there usually seems to be an accompanying student-centred sense. We have seen, for example, how Preston develops his argument in terms of the student benefits of 'a welcome change of pace' and 'an opportunity to use' the target language. Thus Preston seems ambiguous here about two types of 'creativity': the first concerned with an attribute of the created texts (or poems), and the second with the act of creating texts (by students). It should be noted that (at least in theory) these two kinds of creativity are neither contradictory nor mutually exclusive, but rather can be aimed for simultaneously in a well-balanced manner. Nevertheless, the fact is that often the artistic/literary creativity is regarded as too demanding for language learners to achieve, and that the student-centred 'creativity' is much more popular as an appropriate, reasonable goal.

The question arises, however: if language teaching need not lead to any literary value, is there any justifiable reason for using poetry? For many researchers involved in language teaching around the end of the 1970s, the answer would have most probably been in the negative. As shown in the other extracts above, 'creativity' was present in contemporary discourse not only in America and Britain but also in Japan; however, in their uses of the term there does not seem to be any sign of its literary origins.

A clear example of this can be seen in the second extract, where the authors explicitly define 'creativity in language learning' as 'the human learner's predisposition' deeply 'rooted in innate and universal structural properties of the mind'. In other words, there is nothing special about this type of creativity, which is commonly shared by all normal human beings. Further, the authors claim that such 'creative' human learners usually 'organize input in ways that exhibit a certain independence from external characteristics': one of its possible implications is that even if poems are provided as input, there is no guarantee that their textual characteristics would be directly reflected in learners' output,



and still less that they would contribute to the learners' acquisition of the target language in any predictable manner. When characterised in these ways, creativity comes down from its artistic/literary heights and becomes part of the mystery of how linguistic input is cognitively processed by normal human learners.

This use of 'creativity' could be seen as the one supported by those involved in theoretical SLA (second language acquisition) research; even though they may accept a cognitive-linguistic conception of creativity, this does not necessarily imply the selection of any particular pedagogical option. On the other hand, however, in the years around 1980 there was yet another use of the term, which seems to still be preferred by language teachers today.

This use is illustrated in the third example, where Baddock develops an argument for the most popular pedagogical principle in language teaching at that time, 'communication'. In this passage 'creative' is used to describe such activities as 'communicating subjective ideas, personal impressions, and imagined situations', which Baddock claims are 'motivated by a desire for self-expression' and therefore 'psychologically fulfilling and basic in much of human language use'. Also suggestive is that Baddock explicitly distinguishes his use of 'creative' from the one 'in a "literary" sense', instead emphasising the importance of 'verbal responses which are personal and imaginative in nature'. Thus by his use of the term 'creative', Baddock seems to be delineating what he considers to be the main concern of language teaching by contrasting it with two other pedagogical options. On the one hand, he favours affectively and psychologically productive ('creative') methods over those based on mechanical or purely functional views of language (with the exclusive aim of 'conveying information or "getting things done"'). On the other hand, he also explicitly refuses to attach any privileged (artistically or literarily creative) status to language learning, and rather confirms that it is open to every normal learner. Academic opinion seems to have been similar in Japan where, at the time (as shown in the fourth extract) some doubts started to be cast on traditional Japanese methods of English teaching and learning. Reformers argued that these mechanical and knowledge-focused methods (such as 'translating Japanese sentences written by somebody else into English') should be replaced with other humanly meaningful ones, here again characterised as 'creative'.

### 3. Towards principled teaching practice

#### 3.1. And I became a student of creativity

Well before I started to involve myself in academic research in second language teaching, there had already existed at least three different uses of the word 'creativity' in the literature: a valued quality of input and output, a cognitive faculty innate to all human beings and a humanistic virtue in language teaching. Most disconcerting to me is the fact that 'creativity' in its artistic/literary sense has been driven to the periphery of the whole field of SLA. One consequence of this would be discouraging: even if I were to attempt to argue for 'creative writing' in SLA, this might at best be received as an example of anachronistic idealism, and at worst as adding more confusion to the existing chaos.

Even with these terminological problems, however, I still cannot ignore one hard fact: from my own experience as a former undergraduate and as a present university teacher of English, I retain a strong

conviction (Prabhu's (1990) 'sense of plausibility') about the effectiveness of what is usually called 'creative writing' in various specific contexts widely found in Japan, and I would even claim there exist certain contextual reasons which make creative writing an appropriate pedagogical option for tertiary-level learners in Japan.

It is not my intention to claim that creative writing is applicable to any academic situation; I do not deny my experience is limited. Nevertheless, I still believe it justifiable to report what I have experienced teaching creative writing. As long as my teaching is conducted on a solid and sound theoretical basis, is described with sufficient clarity and is assessed by academically reasonable criteria, such reporting could be relevant to teachers situated in similar contexts. To others in different contexts it might provide an opportunity to compare their own methods to ELT. I am also encouraged by recent arguments favourable to teachers conducting 'action research' (mentioned at the beginning of this paper): since my own conception of 'creativity', although still unclear, does not seem to have any exact equivalent in the ELT field, I must make my own way forward, connecting my teaching practice to the academic research available.

Thus began my thorough enquiry into creativity: whatever I might finally decide upon as my own approach to language teaching, it would have to involve this mysterious concept with an attractive name.

### 3.2. The itinerary

For my teaching practice of creative English writing to be grounded on solid principles, there are some issues which require serious consideration. In Section 2 I chose to start this long reflective journey by reviewing my descriptive investigation into how the term 'creativity' (with its cognate forms) has been used in the discourse of second language writing. The primary motivation for the research derives from the fact that most uses of the term 'creativity' in this specific field seem to be at more or less variance with what I mean by 'creative English writing'. It would seem that this problem is not solved by simply stating that 'I will use the term "creativity" in such and such a way, which is different from the ones usually found in this field'. My usage would have to at least be based on a knowledge of the contextual, historical and theoretical backgrounds behind the other uses: without careful comparison with these, any new definition would be open to a charge of arrogance. Even the few samples presented in Section 2 indicate that terminological transitions concerning creativity have been woven into the ever-changing trends in linguistics and language teaching/learning discourse, and possible crucial factors influencing these transitions seem to include post-behaviourist linguistics, humanistic education and communicative language teaching.

If a general picture is gained through this research, the next step will be to direct a more focused reflective attention to the case of Japan, where I myself teach, and thus whose context surrounding English writing instruction is of practical and realistic relevance to my teaching. Above all it will be necessary to consider the matter of the traditionally most prevalent method of English writing, *wabun-eiyaku* (or Japanese-English translation), oriented towards entrance examinations. This fundamentally secondary-level concern must also be taken into account in considering tertiary-level English writing instruction in Japan, since most university students share a background in this deeply-rooted method of



preparing for examinations. Explorations in this direction are all the more important because the presently dominant use of '*souzou-sei*' ('creativity'), which differs from my own use of the term, was originally put forward as a key concept justifying the reform movement away from *wabun-eiyaku* instruction. Although it seems doubtful that this concept of creativity could really be a fundamental solution to problems of *wabun-eiyaku* instruction, we must at least clarify which aspects of Japan's traditional English writing instruction were viewed as 'uncreative'.

Such preparatory reflective explorations will lay the foundations on which to build my own teaching principle of 'creativity' in a comparative and constructive way. In brief, my beliefs as a teacher could be summarised as follows. On the one hand, as far as tertiary-level English writing instruction to Japanese learners is concerned, there should be enough enjoyment to motivate them to write in English as a second language. On the other hand, this pleasure should also be accompanied by a sufficient intellectual challenge, which will further stimulate their motivation to go beyond what they have already acquired in secondary-level *wabun-eiyaku* instruction. From this point of view 'creative English writing', retaining some of its artistic and literary nuances, could conceivably meet these requirements, as my own experience assures me. It is not that other non-literary ideas about creativity must be abandoned: it is just that they focus exclusively on the personal process involved in creating something, and to that extent do not take into account the interpersonal process in which something is regarded as being creative. My approach attaches equal importance to both elements of creativity, because the former element alone would not be enough to give the above-mentioned pleasure and intellectual challenge to tertiary-level learners.

The validity of the above theoretical reflection needs to be demonstrated by longitudinal research describing, analysing and assessing my own teaching practice of a Japanese university. Since the hypothesised effects of the above approach primarily concern positive changes in learners' motivation, the effectiveness of such instruction might best be analysed with qualitative methods. On the other hand, the present research is also interested in whether such psychological changes actually lead to the improvement of learners' writing proficiency beyond *wabun-eiyaku* (even though the research would only cover short-term effects), and for this purpose there would be a place for quantitative methods. Thus it would seem desirable to analyse the effectiveness of my teaching practice with a combination of these two types: a synthesis of the data collected through these different channels will hopefully provide a clearer insight into the realities of my attempts to teach 'creative writing'.

It must be noted here that, whatever the results obtained through such research, they will not inhibit my daily work as a teacher/researcher: whether they support or contradict my 'sense of plausibility', the results will surely be fed back into my teaching practice and make a definite contribution towards modifying or solidifying my teaching principles, whose validity I will again test in practice, further revising my approach. There is a long way to go, and I hope the reflective journey will continue until the last day of my career as a teacher/researcher.

## Notes

- 1 For the convenience of those unfamiliar with Japanese historical figures, the allusion here is to *How I Became a Christian* by Kanzo Uchimura, a Japanese author, journalist and religious leader: this autobiographical essay, published in 1895, is counted as one of the earliest English publications produced by Japanese writers.
- 2 The lecturer of the course mentioned in Section 1.3 defines the term in a similar way in one of his papers: 'All the [poetic] texts [presented to the students] ... do show creative uses of the English language, whether we take creative to mean "technically or linguistically inventive" or "imaginatively stimulating". The students' written responses are also creative: in other words, they do not write critical papers on what they have read nor do they study the text as a mere example of the English language system, but rather create their own texts which use English in the linguistically inventive or imaginatively stimulating ways which they have noticed while working with the reading texts' (Rossiter 1997: 30).

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