

USING CREATIVE WRITING TO DEVELOP FLUENCY IN THE TARGET LANGUAGE

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1. Introduction

Throughout Europe there is a growing interest in developing content based language instruction programmes and immersion education. Much of the early research in immersion education has shown that this method of language instruction is effective and students develop high levels of communicative fluency in the target language. However, students' written and spoken language often lacks precision in vocabulary use and tends to be limited to a more formal, academic register.

As a classroom practitioner working in the field of bilingual education one of the most difficult aspects of the work is keeping up to date with developments in research. And, if research is to have an effect on what takes place in the classroom, the teacher then has to turn research findings into good classroom practice.

The challenge for the classroom teacher is to find ways of increasing fluency in the target language. While systematic teaching of grammar and vocabulary can go some way towards achieving this, students need more opportunities to use the target language in a variety of forms.

This paper will look at ways in which creative writing projects can be used to develop fluency in the target language. It will look at writing from the early primary years through to secondary education and show how critical literacy skills can be developed through linking students' own writing to other texts.

2. What research has to say about immersion education

Immersion education has been well documented over the years and research has shown it to be an effective method of teaching a second language. Research consistently shows that students attain high levels of communicative competence in the target

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language with no adverse affects to students' native language or academic development. However, research also shows that while students attain native like levels in reading and understanding the target language, the same can not be said for their written and spoken work (Swain, 1988; Cummins, 2000).

Detailed analyses of the oral and written production skills of immersion students indicate a number of specific shortcomings. First, students' grammar is less complex and less redundant than that of native speakers. Whereas native speakers have a number of different ways of expressing the same ideas, immersion students have fewer ways –often only one. Second, their grammar is influenced by English grammar [the native language]. Third, immersion students' use of language is often non-idiomatic. More specifically, their lexical and syntactic usage deviates from that of native speakers in ways that are not incorrect but that are uncommon or unusual. (Genesee, 1999)

Research also suggests that both teachers and students consider understanding content to be more important than accurate language use (Swain, 1988). This is understandable when the focus in the classroom is on academic achievement. However, if we want students' written and spoken work to reach the same native like levels as their comprehension of the target language, we need to find ways of working in the classroom that encourage students to focus on both content and linguistic accuracy.

3. Using creative writing to develop fluency in the target language

Creative writing offers students a number of opportunities to use language in a variety of ways. Creative writing may take many forms, from narrative stories and poetry to writing non-fiction such as information booklets or posters. Students may write letters or newspaper reports or create cartoon strips or stories to entertain their friends. In short, writing projects can provide students with the opportunity to use language in ways that they would not normally come across in the classroom.

3.1. The writing process

The process of writing involves planning, writing, editing, re-writing, proof reading and presenting a piece of work. The different stages in the writing process allow the students to focus on different aspects of language at different times. This allows students to focus on content and meaning in the early stages of writing. Once students have a clear idea of what they want to say, they can look more carefully at how they are going to say it and focus on using language accurately and to good effect. Linking

students' own writing to existing texts provides students with the experience and vocabulary they need to be able to look at texts more critically.

3.2. Planning: What do you want to say?

The planning process is an important part of a writing task. Asking students, "What do you want to say?" allows them to bring their own experiences to the classroom and share them as a valued part of classroom work. Thinking about what we want to say activates our prior knowledge and existing vocabulary. Before students start writing they should have a clear idea of the message they want to share and a collection of words ready to use: "writing... involves weaving previous knowledge into the fabric of current meaning" (Datta, 2000: 96).

3.2.1. There are many different planning activities that can be used in the classroom with students of different ages. Perhaps the most useful is using pictures.

It is very important for bilingual children to talk about their 'iconic representations' [Bruner, 1996: 11], as in so doing they learn how to make verbal representations of meanings in their second language. I believe that young bilinguals should be positively encouraged to make meaning iconically, as images have no language barriers. (Datta, 2000: 101)

Planning in pictures allows students to focus on creating meaning. Using storyboards helps students, not just to think about what they want to say, but also to think about how they are going to say it. Students begin to put their narrative in order, selecting only the most important details to illustrate on the storyboard. Their sense of narrative structure begins to develop even in the earliest years of primary school.

With older students, using planning sheets can help them to focus on aspects of narrative structure and language use, and can help students to think more carefully about, "how they are going to say".

Timed writing exercises are another way to help students gather their words and thoughts on paper before they start writing. Students should be asked to think about one aspect of their story, perhaps describing a character or the setting, or writing a piece of dialogue between two characters. The students are then asked to write for five minutes without stopping. They don't need to think about spelling or sentence structure, the aim is to get as many words as possible on to the page. When the time is up students are asked to read what they have written, to themselves or a partner, and to highlight any useful words, phrases or ideas that have been written down. This provides them with a

starting point for their writing. Timed writing exercises are a useful way for students to explore writing from different view points or comparing the effect of different writing styles.

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3.2.2. Vocabulary instruction

Immersion students' vocabulary is often limited, both in the amount of vocabulary they have to express themselves and the range of vocabulary they have in different subject areas. Teachers working in immersion education must constantly find ways to extend students' vocabulary, providing them with many alternative ways to express their ideas.

According to Nagy (1998), the three properties of powerful vocabulary instruction are integration, repetition and meaningful use. Vocabulary instruction should be integrated with other knowledge so students can organise new words and relate them to their existing knowledge. Students need repeated exposure to new words if they are to become a part of their active vocabulary and this is best done through using words in meaningful contexts.

Vocabulary instruction as part of the planning process can be very effective. Students are motivated to find the best words to express their ideas. Collecting words

before they start writing allows them to think more carefully about both what they will say and how they will say it.

Vocabulary instruction may simply be a matter of brainstorming to collect words related to a subject. However, asking students to organise words and to think more carefully about their similarities and differences in meaning helps students to become more precise in their choice of vocabulary when it comes to writing.

Personal characteristics	Personal characteristics	
	Positive	Negative
Greedy helpful shy nervous	Helpful	greedy
	Shy	nervous
Introvert extrovert	Confident	introvert
	Quiet	extrovert
Confident mean	Friendly	mean
	Independent	lonely
Unkind quiet friendly		unfriendly
Unfriendly lonely independent		

3.2.3. Using a writing journal

Using a notebook just for writing is useful as students can keep all their work in one place. Students should have a place where they can write down ideas, keep lists of words and make sketches to help them with their writing. More importantly, keeping a writing journal allows students to look back and see how their work has progressed. We forget that most of the written work students see is in its final form. It has already been edited and corrected. It can be a great relief for many students to realise that written text is rarely perfect the first time round. Even the greatest writers go back and look at their work again in order to make it better. Giving students permission both to make mistakes and to change their work gives them a greater sense of power over the language they are using.

3.3. Writing

Once students have planned a piece of work they can begin to write. When writing the first draft, students need to be encouraged to get their ideas down on paper

and reminded to refer to their planning for help. At this stage correct spelling and good handwriting are not important. The student should be focused on "what they want to say".

If students are to become fluent at writing in the target language they need to feel confident producing longer texts. For any product, a certain quantity is required before quality can be guaranteed. With practise, students can feel comfortable producing lengthy texts, fairly quickly. They are then ready for the next stage in the writing process.

3.4. Editing

Once a student has the first draft of a text in front of them they can begin to look more closely at the language they have used. They need to think, "Is this what I wanted to say?" and "Is this the best way to say it?"

There are many ways in which students can be encouraged to look at their work more closely. Simply reading work aloud to oneself or to another student can draw attention to grammatical errors, spelling mistakes and inconsistencies in a text. But the editing process should not only focus on these. If students are to improve their use of language they need help identifying the areas in need of improvement.

Editing activities can ask students to identify (underline or highlight) examples of good vocabulary choice, good sentence structure or use of literary devices. Students can be asked to mark areas of the text that do not make sense or can be asked to identify something in the text they think should be changed and to suggest an alternative. It is important that students themselves take an active role in the editing process. With a little guidance and practise, even young students can become effective editors of their own and others' texts.

Identifying examples of good language use is important. First, it provides positive feedback to students. Secondly, it illustrates for others the kind of language they could use. Teaching students to offer constructive criticism of a text is not as difficult as one might think. If students are asked first to identify an area of the text they think should change, and then to offer an alternative, a constructive discussion will often follow as to which word is the best choice, often resulting in the selection of a third or fourth word.

If students have access to computers in the classroom it is a good exercise to move text around and alter the structure of a piece of text. This is particularly useful when creating poetry as students can see how even small changes to a text can have an effect on the text as a whole.

The editing process should raise students' awareness of how language can be used to create certain effects and to carry meaning. In order to express their intended meaning clearly, students need to begin to use language accurately.

3.5. Re-writing–proof reading–presentation

The final stages of the writing process require the students to look again at their choices of language use and make sure that what they have written is what they want to say.

Although re-writing can be a time consuming process, it is important because it allows the student to see their text as a whole. They need to be able to consider the effects of any changes they have made; to view the overall structure of their text and make sure their meaning is expressed clearly.

Proof reading asks students to look closely at the conventions of written text. They should check their spelling, sentence structure and check their work has been punctuated clearly and effectively. It is helpful to offer students a checklist that they can refer to. This also allows the teacher to focus on and reinforce particular aspects of language that have been taught in class. Such a list might focus on capitalisation, punctuating direct speech, the use of prepositions, or any area of language that has been a focus of class work.

In society today presentation is important. A piece of work may be judged as much on how it is presented as on the content it contains. A presentation is made to an audience, and students should be aware of their audience when they present their text. The audience may be themselves, the teacher, younger students or parents.

Texts may be presented orally or in written form. Students may decide they want to illustrate their texts or make them into a book. They should be asked to think about which format would best suit their text. A collection of texts from the whole class can be made into a class book for everyone to share. Students gain a great sense of achievement when they see their work completed. Asking the local library to display

students work, or displaying work around the school shows students that their work is valued.

4. Exploring existing texts

If students are given enough time to practise writing they can become confident users of language, producing fluent texts. Saara, aged 9, wrote “The Teeny Tiny Story”:

Once upon a time there was Teeny Tiny Troll. His name was Teeny Tiny Troll (Trolly). Trolly lived by a teeny tiny river, in a teeny tiny mushroom house.

She goes on to describe Trolly’s day:

After the teeny tiny sleep he went for a teeny tiny walk. His teeny tiny walk went around the nearest tree two times around it and back. He put on his teeny tiny shoes and his teeny tiny sunhat and was ready to go. He ran to the tree two times around it and came back. “What a run” he said.

[Spelling and punctuation are student’s own]

The story goes on to tell us that although Trolly is happy he doesn’t have a friend:

If I would have a friend it wouldn’t matter if it was big or small, a good singer or not, a girl or a boy, but there is one thing I wuld like my friend to be, he must be funny!

Luckily, there is a happy ending and Trolly finds not one, but two friends. A girl troll and a barn owl named Plop. The Barn owl was a character from a story that had been read in class (*The Owl Who Was Afraid Of The Dark*, by Jill Tomlinson) and it is interesting to see how Saara uses here experience of that text when creating her own:

Plop told Hugo and Trolly about those days when he was afraid of the dark. Plop told too that he had been in another story wat was called. The owl who was afraid of the dark. Hugo told stories of being alone and lots more.

When presenting her story, Saara chose to make a book that, like the title of the story, was teeny tiny. She had illustrated her book with detailed pictures of the characters and included speech bubbles that complemented the text. For example, a picture of Hugo the troll saying, “I was lonely” followed a picture of Plop the barn owl saying, “I was afraid of the dark”.

Using other texts to provide a model for students’ writing is a good exercise. Students feel confident using another text as a model for their own writing as they have a sense of where their story is going. They also see examples of good narrative structure and language use that they can use in their own writing.

Roope, aged 9, read a poem in class about a hedgehog, and used the poem as a model for his own writing:

“Cat Watching”

I didn't know
A fat ball of fur
Coiled up like a hose
Could move and make noises.

I didn't know
That two green lamps,
Shinning in the darkness,
Could look for mice.

I didn't know,
A tight rope walker
Needs whiskers and a tail to balance.

But now I do!

In order to use existing texts effectively, students should be asked to look closely at how existing texts are structured. They should be asked to look at how an author has created a certain effect, or has made use of literary devices. Students then need to practise using similar structures and devices in their own writing.

Students need guidance when exploring texts. They need to be directed to quality texts that offer clear examples of good language use. They then need to be reminded to apply what they have seen to their own work.

After looking closely to see how one author had made use of similes, Mikko, age 10, began to include similes in his own writing:

Melting Snow

The snow is melting
It is spring
The ice-cubes floating in the sea
Like little meatballs on the plate
They disappear
Under the cool sun.

Writing tasks in the classroom can ask students to use existing texts as a model for their own writing.

Exploring texts and using them as a model for students' own writing helps a student gain experience of working with texts and provides them with the vocabulary

they need to discuss texts critically. Being able to identify aspects of good language use in their own texts and make use of literary devices will give students increasing confidence to explore and discuss more difficult texts in the future.

Think of a character from a story you have read.

1. Write down all the information you know about this character.

2. Now think!

Which pieces of information did the author:

a) Tell you e.g. Plop was a barn owl

b) Show you e.g. Plop wasn't good at flying.
(Plop closed his eyes, took a deep breath and fell off his branch.)

c) Imply (make you think or guess)

E.g. Plop is learning to like the dark
(He still says he doesn't like it but he wants to watch the fireworks at night.)

3. Invent a character you would like to write a story about. Draw a picture of them.

4. Write a description of your character.

Remember that you don't need to tell everything, you can show some things, and make your readers guess some things.

An essay response to the poem, *The Tyger*, by William Blake, written by Johanna, age 14, demonstrates how students can confidently tackle difficult texts:

In the beginning of the poem Blake writes: 'What immortal hand or eye could frame thy fearful symmetry?' He is clearly asking, in an ironic way, could it be our loving Father. The last paragraph is the same as the first one so Blake wanted us to be convinced that this immortal hand was God's. As in the Bible reads, God has created everything living

Johanna states her interpretation clearly and offers us an insight into her thinking by using examples from the text to illustrate her points. Previous work in class had looked at how authors develop themes and use symbols in their texts. Work relating to this text had focused on using poetry in different ways, but particularly to express an opinion or belief on a subject. Johanna has drawn on her knowledge and experience of working with texts in other contexts to produce a confident and personal interpretation.

Language is a powerful tool. In immersion education it is important that we teach students to use that tool effectively. Teaching and using creative writing in the classroom is one way to offer students a range of experiences working with language. Developing their own writing will help students to improve their own use of language and give them confidence in interpreting other texts.

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