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CREATIVE WRITING FOR THE STATE EXAM PREPARATION

The purpose of the present research was to investigate the effect of integrating ways of teaching creative writing into traditional students' state exams preparation, typical for schools in Russia.

Having analysed different theoretical sources, the organization of the teaching process in a variety of universities as well as summarizing and methodizing her own teaching experience gained from practical studies, the author has drawn together a set of recommendations containing practical tips and a collection of illustrative thought-provoking exercises organized with regard to complexity aimed at stimulating the learners, provoking their interest, expressiveness and creativity, which may be of use to anyone interested in this issue. The author has gained data to prove that the combination of traditional teaching methods and those training creative writing skills can be perceived as most effective means for the state exams preparation helping the students to acquire and master skills of observation, artistic perception and thought expression, the combination of which are mobilized for writing an emotional discourse.

The author provides data showing a significant increase of motivation, accuracy and precision in the group of students participating in the experimental course advocating the effectiveness of creative writing teaching both for the state exams preparation as well as for the development of literary and linguistic skills.

Keywords: *creativity, emotion, description, metaphor, expressiveness, motivation.*

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ОБУЧЕНИЕ ТВОРЧЕСКОМУ ПИСЬМУ В ПОДГОТОВКЕ К ЕДИНОМУ ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОМУ ЭКЗАМЕНУ

Цель данной статьи – проведение исследования эффекта, который был достигнут благодаря интеграции различных способов обучения творческому письму в традиционную, принятую в Российской школе, подготовку студентов к сдаче единого государственного экзамена (ЕГЭ).

Проанализировав различные теоретические источники, организацию учебного процесса в ряде зарубежных учебных заведений, а также суммировав и систематизировав личный опыт преподавания, полученный на практических занятиях, автором статьи подготовлены комплект рекомендаций, содержащих разнообразные практические советы, а также коллекция иллюстративных упражнений, которые могут стимулировать работу мысли, организованных с учетом нарастания уровня сложности и направленных на увеличение мотивации учащихся, повышение экспрессивности письменного дискурса и творческой активности учеников, что в целом может быть полезной информацией для любого читателя, интересующегося данной темой.

Автором приводятся данные, доказывающие, что сочетание традиционных методов и способов обучения с разнообразными видами работы над художественным письмом может рассматриваться как эффективный путь к подготовке и сдаче государственного экзамена, поскольку помогает студентам обрести и развить искусство наблюдения, художественное восприятие дей-

ствительности и умение выразить мысль, что, будучи использованным в комплексе, максимально востребовано при написании эмоционального дискурса.

Автор предоставляет фактическую информацию, демонстрирующую значительный рост мотивации, точности изложения мысли и грамматической правильности в группе старшеклассников, участвовавших в экспериментальном курсе, поддерживающем идею эффективности обучения творческому письму не только как части подготовки к сдаче государственных экзаменов, но и способствующему развитию литературных и лингвистических способностей учащихся.

Ключевые слова: *творчество, эмоция, описание, метафора, экспрессивность, мотивация.*

Introduction

Motivating students to write creatively is becoming increasingly challenging [1] in the present-day era of highly-developed technical means of education and the system of state exams based on learning stereotypes. Since a very young age children become accustomed to visual images of all types, interactive games and 'complete-the-gaps' exercises, which can hardly ever be called creative. Upon completion of a task adjusted to the average student the learner is granted a certain status or given a mark when he or she obtains the programmed result. School education, however, is aimed at acquiring and training a certain number of skills necessary for passing state exams following a given pattern which is often blamed for being unmotivating and uninspiring. For that reason, the teacher needs to be really creative to achieve an emotional descriptive response from a learner and to increase willingness for studying under such circumstances.

The author of the paper has put forward a hypothesis that teaching creative writing does not hinder the process of mastering the patterns needed for the state exam but, on the contrary, serving as the source of inspiration and creativity, may increase the learners' motivation for studies, accuracy and precision and, consequently, help the students get better results at the exam.

The purpose of the work done was to try to elaborate a set of recommendations on the application of the methods for teaching creative writing described in this paper together with the accepted traditional forms of preparation for the state exams.

1. Literature review

Literature review has revealed the fact that most teachers are trying to employ a variety of methods, approaches and strategies to foster motivation among learners, among which problem-based learning is worth mentioning, as learners are encouraged into working out a solution to the stated problem having passed through consequent stages of team work and peer discussion.

Another highly advocated approach suggests a case-study method as an effective tools for alleviating the problem, as when provided with a real-world scenario the students get inspired expecting some practical use upon the application of the work in class.

Project-based learning seems to be another means of tackling the problem. The process of integrating projects into a variety of subjects extending the boundaries of disciplines results in an increase of the students' enthusiasm.

All the mentioned above approaches, though different as they may seem, are based upon a common universal assumption stating the existence of direct correlation between a rise in the interest of the students in the content of studying and a consequent boost in their motivation to face the challenge.

However, insufficient research seems to have been conducted in the field of creative writing application as a method of raising motivation for learning English in general and getting prepared for the state exam in particular.

Therefore, a research was conducted to investigate the effect of using the methods of teaching creative writing to a class of high school students in the preparatory course for the state exam in English.

2. Methodology

The following methods were applied for the research:

1) Analysis of the ways of teaching creative writing in different UK Universities

The present paper has attempted to analyse the most significant experience in teaching creative writing in the most well-known universities of Great Britain, focusing attention on the accepted approaches to getting the students interested in the course.

2) Observations of the students

A careful and systematic observation of the students' behaviour with regard to their emotional state was conducted in various contexts or learning situations. Thus, lack of interest which might result in some serious academic problems otherwise was detected at an early stage, identified and interpreted.

3) Discussion of the motivational problems

Frequent conversations both with individual students as well as groups of learners, online chatting and interviews supplemented the other methods in an attempt to elaborate most adequate strategies for increasing motivation.

4) Experimental teaching

Teaching creative writing as an experiment lasting half a year was conducted in a group of 25 high school students getting prepared for taking the state exam at the end of the tested period.

5) Devising a questionnaire of the students

A special questionnaire comprising a set of questions was devised to obtain statistical data on the changes in the level of motivation of the students who had participated in the experimental course.

3. Composition of the course

The composition of the course has been elaborately arranged to achieve the desired effect of getting the students interested and, therefore, motivated.

It should be noted that the student is to start with a relatively straightforward task which becomes more sophisticated as the skills are acquired. The student is treated as a researcher whose innovative approach or unusual vision is always welcomed by his tutor no matter how questionable it may seem. To exercise the secret

talent of a creative writer the learner should feel absolutely free of all the boundaries or limits imposed upon him by the educational system in general, and the state exam in particular.

There can be a great variety of possible assignments. Those which follow below are sample-tasks which can be altered or modified to meet the demands of students or reach the ultimate aim of the course.

3.1. It is quite logical to start with some simple *descriptions of the objects* which the students see in their everyday life. It is better to avoid abstract notions and to concentrate mostly on things which can be touched, tried, smelled or tasted. At this stage the learner may be taught the differences between descriptions of an object, a landscape, a human being, interior or an event.

As an introductory task the student may be asked to write a descriptive sentence about a well-known substance such as *flour, soap, cream, mustard, coal, chalk*. The students are taught in this way to be accurate in giving details, to train and develop both keenness of observation and visual thinking, as well as to rely upon different senses when giving descriptions. The next thing the learners describe can be *a freshly cut orange, milk which has boiled over, a whistling tea kettle*, reproducing the flavour, the smell or the sound given off in such a way that the reader can feel or hear it himself.

3.2. It may be advisable to follow a strict sequence of steps which are to be taken by the learners. These include description, narration, possibly containing elements of explanation, argumentation and a discursive essay, which may develop into polemic.

There is a wide variety of assignments, among which the following are worth mentioning, as they can possibly help to cope with the tasks of the state exam:

- Develop the given sentence into a text [2].
- Change the style of the text without changing the contents.
- Write a full version of the story on the basis of its summary [3].
- Reconstruct the omitted ending/ beginning of the story.
- Compile a guide book with must-do instructions.
- Write a political pamphlet.
- Create your own web page.
- Report on a crime level at a law conference.
- Write a film/a play script.
- Make an advertisement for the business proposal.

3.3. The next level of teaching creative writing may be exercises in emotionally coloured means of expression [4], likely to evoke certain feelings in the soul of each person. The given task may be to express your attitude in two or three sentences to *the Queen of Britain, a visit to a dentist, a child lost in the woods, a pesky insect, a fluffy kitten, a pile of unsorted papers, a home-made apple pie*. It can be

viewed as an excellent way to exercise artistic expression through critical thinking, which is essential when dealing with writing an essay in the English state exam.

It goes without saying that students' personal attitude to the matter described should penetrate the utterance and serve as the dominant factor in evaluation of the result achieved.

It is common knowledge that emotionally coloured attributes, attributive clauses, phraseological units, as well as stylistic devices of all types, containing inner expressiveness are used to add emphasis to a text. They make the writer's point of view explicit and the descriptions colourful and picturesque. However, the main difficulty is presented by the choice of adequate means, giving subjective emotional colouring which presents the main difficulty and has to be trained separately.

The following exercises can serve as the basis for training the students to make their written discourse emotional:

- Complete the gaps trying to reproduce the adjectives/adverbs deliberately omitted from a well-known fairy tale, such as *Cinderella* or *the Seven dwarfs*.

- Take another fairy tale known to the peer students since their childhood and substitute all descriptive attributes with synonyms trying to preserve the contents unchanged.

- Make your own version of a well-known fairy tale changing the descriptive words only.

- Describe the characters or objects involved in the narration with the help of adjectives/idioms/catch or set phrases. Do this in a chain narrative and avoid repetitions.

It must be noted that such exercises despite being speech-provoking are carried out in the form of free writing. This often presupposes collaboration with other students or the teacher [5], and as such they are inspirational and captivating for all the participants of the activity, which might be viewed as extremely motivating when combined with traditional techniques of preparation for writing Tasks 1 and 2 of the state exams, which is often considered to be lacking in creativity and rather monotonous.

3.4. Working with metaphors can be recommended as the next step to be taken.

Although there are countless language units with great expressive power, linguistic research suggests that *metaphor* is the most frequent of stylistic devices, since it noticeably colours the phrase where it appears. It can thus be recommended to adopt teaching methods typical of British Universities where the mastering of the use of metaphors to project wonderful visible images, is considered to be a must.

Students are usually asked to think of their own metaphors based on a list of words given by the teacher [6]. They are then asked to explain in plain words the image they were trying to illustrate. It is quite possible to borrow the idea from another subject being studied at the moment. For example, in the following description made up by a pupil, "Love is like a window in a room. You can live in it but

never enjoy the sunshine it usually brings”, the influence of architecture can be easily traced. Such cross curriculum exercises do not only make close ties between the subjects and clarify thinking but also foster artistic visual perception and thought expression.

3.5. An application of varied forms and styles is needed for developing a personal approach to every student as when trying their hand at writing texts of different types and genres, the student reveals their personal inclinations or preferences and acquires an individual style in writing.

The following tasks which have been exercised by the author of the paper have proved to be successful:

– Describe the actions and emotions experienced, if you see a man drowning in a river.

– A horse meets a stubborn mule on a bridge. Neither wants to give the way. Write a dialogue for them.

– Invent and describe a new animal. Give its physical description, comment upon its diet, natural habitat, reproduction, ways of domesticating and preservation, possible use and danger for people.

– Recall a nightmare you have once had and give your ideas on the reasons for it.

– Imagine taking an interview with the president of your country and write a plan you are going to follow.

– You have been appointed director of Hogwarts, prepare an inauguration speech to be delivered to the public.

– You have erroneously been awarded the Nobel Prize for someone else's invention. Write him a letter of apology.

– Write a comic sketch on the funniest crime of the year.

– Write a message to an intelligence officer aimed at misleading the possible enemy, using a secret code giving detailed instructions as to the use of a strategically important site.

There are a huge number of similar tasks, which might provoke wild imagination of the students and encourage them into creative writing.

4. Results of the study

4.1 The findings of the research with regard to the recommended sources of inspiration are outlined below.

– Music is often considered to be a universal stimulus for creative writing [7].

While listening to a musical piece the audience may be asked to put down all the adjectives describing the mood evoked. The teacher can play excerpts of music from different genres to analyse any change of emotions brought about and to write an interpretation for it. Students can try to imagine the characters depicted in lyrics, describe their backgrounds, relations, develop their life story.

– Watching the behaviour of people engaged in some form of activity can develop the observation skills necessary for the writer, and also be an enjoyable task. Learners may be given a homework assignment *to describe the most common behaviour of a person taking his dog out for a walk or an old lady passing the street.*

Students can use their imagination to develop the characters of the strangers, they have once encountered, conveying their feelings and background.

For better motivation the students may have a free hand on the topic which is to be chosen for writing. The only requirement is that the project should be entertaining for the audience and emotionally coloured [1]. Thus, appearance of a new baby, expectations before the first date, a quarrel with a teacher, parents' divorce, a job as a volunteer can all provide much inspiration for an interesting topic.

– Browsing the Net for inspiration.

Given that we live in a time of highly developed technology where students are accustomed to computerized communication, it might be a good idea to stimulate an *email* discussion. For instance, the students may be given different versions of the same text and have to find out the differences and similarities of the narration sending e-mails to other students. Such conversations are likely to increase the independence of learners, accuracy of speech, conciseness and attentiveness to details.

– One of the most effective ways to get learners excited in a lesson and encourage them to speak and write creatively is to show them a thought-provoking *video* [8], a *clip* relevant to the topic, taken from YouTube or any other similar source.

Having watched the video clip, the students form an idea which can be developed in the written form. The necessary help in setting, structuring or organizing the ideas might be provided by the tutor or derived from the discussion with the peer group. This helps them express themselves afterwards in the creation a text of their own text. This also makes structuring of the text much easier as it becomes more meaningful. It may be viewed as a perfect combination of traditional forms of teaching preparation for the exams fueled by creative motivational sources.

Different trailers to films which the students have not watched yet can be shown in the group. They can be asked to comment upon them in the form of a project. The students should exercise keen observation abilities as well as critical thinking in an attempt to predict the possible failures and weak points in each case as well as the public response and the press comments. It might be extremely entertaining to compare the actual film reviews with the students' versions afterwards.

– *Experience taken from real life* can serve as a very sound basis for describing it in the form of a text [9]. Each person gets excited when discussing an event which has taken place in his real life. To help them reconstruct that happening and evoke the feelings which were experienced, then we may need to apply to certain technical resources. For example, when trying to recall a most memorable trip,

some light music may be played, pictures of beautiful landscapes shown and the sea shells or pebbles brought to touch and smell.

The learners should get accustomed to relying upon all their senses when describing anything that arouses their feelings. With such help learners begin to look for more vivid descriptive language [10] which they otherwise may not have recalled.

– Using *drama* in class can also be highly motivational for the learners [11], who become immersed into the life of the characters, experience their feelings, act out the most significant dialogues for the better understanding of the script and sum up their impressions or the opinions in the form of a written text. Students may be given an open-ended play and be asked to write the continuation, trying to work out some features of the characters.

Such an activity will develop the skill of expressing the thoughts in an emotional, creative and even theatrical way.

– Poems by famous poets can develop the latent abilities of the students and help reveal a hidden talent for creativity naturally present in every speaker [12]. Poetry can develop their sense of humour and make a great contribution to an increase in their self-esteem.

An element of surprise, the creation of a playful atmosphere conducive for experimentation and innovation are always appreciated [13]. However, the common rules and regulations typical of creation of the written discourse should not be neglected. For example, when trying their hand at writing limericks, learners should adhere to all the necessary canons inherent in this type of verse. If the task is to write a letter of complaint or an application structural peculiarities and adequate stylistic norms are to be taught first.

– The importance of classics of English or American literature in teaching creative writing should not be underestimated. Learners who have been taught to appreciate great literary works commonly feel engaged into creative writing of their own. Needless to say, they contain all the necessary elements which can be introduced to beginners such as theme, setting, action, characters, conflict, twist, development and resolution. These are elements which can deliberately be added to their work of fiction. The hooks or the triggers borrowed from great masters will be discussed separately as in most cases they influence the effect the story produces. When applied to the tasks at the state exam such literary skills can help cope with the set tasks at a more professional level.

However, in their search for identity learners should be allowed to imitate the style of a certain writer or use the device of exaggeration to achieve a comic effect as the experience accumulated might help to develop a unique personal style.

Constructing a dialogue between different masters of the classics can constitute another challenging task. This demands a good command of the language units within different layers of English. It may be advisable to choose literary works

which focus on more or less the same eternal problems as war and peace, love and hatred, the generation gap or similar ones. These can be looked upon from different angles and imagine a conversation between the writers discussing their points of view expressed in the form of a play script, followed by an analytical essay.

Literary production raising eternal issues or global problems teach students to take a well-reasoned, logical and judicious approach, so much appreciated in writing Task 2 of the state exam.

4.2. After the methods mentioned above were applied to high-school students they were asked to answer a questionnaire aimed at evaluating the level of motivation for learning English in general and getting prepared for the state exam in particular. The summary of the results is presented in the form of a line chart below, in which the horizontal axis shows the number of the participants whereas the vertical axis represents the level of motivation assessed by the students themselves on the scale from 0 to 10 before and after taking up the course in creative writing.

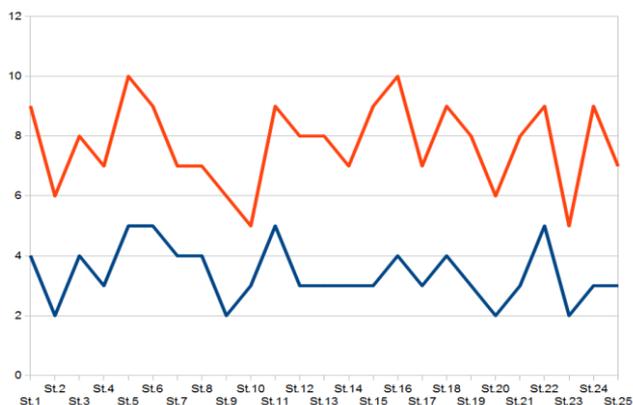


Fig. Motivation for Learning English:

— before the course; — after the course

From the chart it is clear that on the whole motivation of all the respondents has either doubled or nearly tripled.

There is also a psychological aspect of creative writing which seems to be worth mentioning. Adherents of this type of exercises claim that they help maintain a balance between the left and right cerebral hemispheres of the human brain. It is a well-known fact that learning foreign languages engages the left part of the brain which controls the speech, memory, logic, as well as reading and writing abilities, whereas the right part of the brain which is responsible for data processing expressed by symbols and images allows us to have dreams, invent, or tell stories.

Feelings, emotions, physical sensations are also located in this sphere which makes it mostly involved in teaching creative writing. Furthermore, it increases self-confidence [14] and adds to the self-esteem of the learner who has discovered

the talent and aspiration for creative writing, fosters artistic imagination, increases critical thinking [15], develops linguistic abilities and as a consequence, is better motivated for learning a foreign language.

4.3. In keeping with the traditions of creative writing the students were also asked to give their own evaluation of the creative writing effect when integrated in the course of preparation for the state exam. The most common answers are given in the table below, listed in a priority level according to their frequency:

Effects of learning creative writing

The fear of failure at the exam has been overcome.
New knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary has been gained.
Self-awareness and accuracy in using the English language have increased.
It has become easier to show the difference in colloquial speech needed for Task 1 (a letter to a friend) as compared to an official high-flown style necessary for Task 2 (an essay).
Literary skills have developed.
Writing has become pain turned into pleasure.
Marks in writing compositions in both Russian and Literature have become better.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration everything that has been mentioned above it can, therefore, be concluded that the combination of traditional teaching methods with the tasks aimed at mastering creative writing skills can be recommended as an effective tools for the state exams preparation.

Creative writing can be considered a very productive means of education, since it develops intuition, reflects the character, emotions and feelings of the author. It can help the students acquire skills of observation, artistic perception and thought expression [9], which in combination are highly useful for the skills of writing an emotional discourse.

When applied to the tasks at the state exam such literary skills can help cope with the set tasks at a more professional level, which means that the hypothesis stated at the beginning of the papers is proved to be true.

Teaching creative writing can be a fascinating process for everyone engaged in it, especially if it is exercised in a variety of forms, styles and methods and is extremely beneficial for developing the learners' linguistic abilities, increasing their self-confidence and contributing to their self-esteem.

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