Discourse and Creativity Issues in EFL Creative Writing on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, have been used by young Arabs for many purposes such as reporting breaking news, posting special events, launching political campaigns, announcing family gatherings and sending seasons’ greetings. Another emerging type of timeline posts is creative writing in English. Some Arab Facebook users post lines of verse, short anecdotes or points of view, express emotions, personal experiences, and/or inspirational stories or sayings written in literary style. A sample of Facebook creative writing pages/clubs, and creative timeline posts was collected and analyzed to find out the forms and themes of creative writing texts. A sample of Facebook Arab creative writers was also surveyed to find out the reasons for their creative writing activities in English. This article describes the data collection and analysis procedures, and reports results quantitatively and qualitatively. Implications for developing creative writing skills in foreign/second language learners using Facebook are given.

Keywords: Arab Students, Creative Discourse, Creative Writers, Creative Writing, ESL, Facebook, L2, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

In foreign/second language (L2) teaching and learning environments, some students and instructors feel that writing is a chore. Some students are hesitant to write because they are inhibited, afraid of making mistakes or because they are incapable of generating ideas. To enhance students’ writing skills, in general, and creative writing, in particular, researchers and teachers have utilized several instructional strategies and practices, such as collaborative creative writing activities, assignments and projects (Vass, 2002; Feuer, 2011; Bremner, Peirson-Smith & Bhatia, 2014; Arshavskaya, 2015), the integration of cooperative learning and journalizing (Bartscher, Lawler, Ramirez & Schinault, 2001; Racco, 2010), using wordless picture books (Henry, 2003), learning about photography and using it as inspiration for students’ creative writing (Haines, 2015), plot scaffolding (O’Day, 2006), the cluster method (Sahbaz & Duran, 2011), the integration of creative and critical written responses to literary texts in different genres (Racco, 2010; Wilson, 2020).
In addition to the above classroom techniques, several technologies such as word processors, e-mail, specially designed software and Powerpoint presentation were utilized two decades ago, to develop L1 and L2 students’ writing skills (Casella, 1989; Biesenbach-Lucas & Weassenforth, 200; and Hodges, 1999; Scott, 1990; Gammon, 1989; Owen, 1995; Keiner, 1996). At a later stage, online journal writing, computer labs, online courses, online discussion boards, special software, wiki projects and school blogs were used to enhance students’ writing skills. For example, adolescents in Guzzetti and Gamboa’s (2005) study used online journal writing as a literacy practice, and for social connection, identity formation and representation. It proved to be effective in developing Students’ writing skills. Pifarré, Marti and Guijosa (2014) found that the wiki environment helped develop an effective and creative online collaborative learning community among secondary school students. Even seven-year old children who used Kodu code-based software to create imaginary worlds, characters and story lines, and translated their video game-like creations into dynamic short stories excelled in producing sophisticated short stories that were not expected from seven-year olds (Salcito’s, 2012). Likewise, 10-16 year old students in India reported that OmwWriter (a minimalist text editing tool) was an effective tool for feeling better (with music), happier and more relaxed, as it helped them avoid distractions that often come with technology and the internet. It also reduced writing distractions, gave a relaxing writing experience by offering three different writing soundtrack options, as well as three different keyboard-typing sounds (Gonçalves, Campos & Garg, 2015). Elementary school students participating in school blogs reported that blogging enthused them, and gave them access to new kinds of writing and new audiences (Barrs & Horrocks, 2014).

Not only were technologies used to enhance the writing skills of English native-speaking students, but they were also used to help ESL college students develop their writing skills. For example, Al-Jarf’s (2007) found that use of Nicenet, an Online Course Management System, as a supplement to in-class instruction encouraged Saudi freshman students of different proficiency levels to write poems and short stories in English as a foreign language (EFL). In another study, Yunus, Salehi and Chenzi (2012) found that the integration of an online discussion board in ESL writing classrooms helped broaden Malaysian TESL students’ knowledge, increased their motivation, and enhanced their confidence in acquiring writing skills in ESL.

Since 2005, social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn and Pinterest, have been popular in online communication among adult Internet users. They have been used for many purposes such as reporting breaking news, posting special events, launching political campaigns and special causes, announcing family gatherings, sending seasons’ greetings, posting photos and videos of interest to them and posting comments and viewpoints on social, political, economic, and world events. They have also been used by students and instructors, as a communication and instructional medium. A review of the literature has shown a rising interest in the academic applications of social media sites. Numerous studies have investigated issues such as the influence of social media on high school students’ social and academic development (Ahn, 2010), their educational use in higher education (Hung & Yuen, 2010), their use in recruiting undergraduate students (Ferguson, 2010), their impact on academic relations at the university (Rambe, 2011), to investigate appropriate professional behavior of faculty and college students on social media (Malesky & Peters, 2012), to teach international business via social media projects (Alon & Herath, 2014) and others.

In the area of foreign/second language learning, in particular, a multitude of Facebook pages are available, which students can join to develop their listening, speaking, reading, general writing skills, and knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Facebook also has a multitude
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