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THE IMPACT OF CREATIVE WRITING ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE (ENGLISH) PROFICIENCY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Writing in English as a foreign language is a skill which needs to be developed for full proficiency. In writing classes however, students feel anxious and show a negative attitude towards writing. Creative writing activities in foreign language classes might bring some solutions both to writing teachers' difficulties and to students who look down upon writing as a class activity. Creative writing does not require a model to duplicate the prescribed patterns. Creative writing helps students to involve personally and enjoy the writing process. While writing, students are not aware of the progress they make for full proficiency. The education system in Turkey requires the curriculum to be covered; learning is dictated and personal freedom is ignored. However, university level students need to build the capacity to comment on any kind of topic that they may come across during their lifetime. A system which encourages the students to do creative writing both in L1 and in L2 would allow them to realize their own linguistic skills. There is always a need for creative people who can improve themselves and make contributions to their environment. This paper aims to show whether creative writing based EFL classes at tertiary level would be effective in the improvement of writing skills of the students.

Keywords: EFL, ELT, L1, L2, FL, writing, creativity, creative writing

In every field, nowadays, there is a need for creative people who can improve themselves and make contributions to their environment (Cengizhan, 1997). However, in ESL/EFL writing, the creative aspect which contributes to the quality of writing and success are less focused (Antoniou & Moriarty, 2008). In Turkish EFL teaching contexts, accuracy is emphasized more than fluency despite the suggested and pushed "communicative approach". Oral or written communication enables people to express their ideas and feelings. That is why all the language proficiency tests have oral and written expression sections. Developing written proficiency skills is not easy in EFL classes because of the traditional writing conventions to be covered in writing classes. Students easily develop negative attitudes towards writing in English. Creative writing could be a remedy.

Creative writing was an educational reform between 1880 and 1940 (Myers, 1993). Since schools fail to promote communication in the areas of oral and written expression, new responsibilities are felt and the educative value and hygienic worth of creative writing is discovered again (Witty, 1940). Creative writing was an attack on the formalism of current English studies and a desire to show the academic forms of English study in human experience (Mearns, 1923). The general idea of creative writing is producing narratives, stories, plays or poems, but how efficient it is if used in ELT classrooms is still under discussion.

Creative writing is a chance to free your imagination in which people get satisfaction. Through creative writing, students can use their linguistic capabilities and go deeper and further that they cannot do in oral expression. They express more personal thoughts and

mental images. Therefore, creative writing tasks are motivating both for L1 and L2 students (Harmer, 2004).

Descriptions of objects, smell or a sound, novels, stories, poems, plays, imaginative diaries, letters, dialogues, free writing from photographs, writing of pastiche, reviews of books, films, current events, controversial issues, writing scripts for stage or radio drama are the studies that can be used for creative writing (Durham, 1970). Creative activities with appropriate level and enough linguistic knowledge are useful to motivate L2 learners and to promote participation since the process approach is favoured.

In the mid 1980s, the process approach was put forward as a reaction to the product approach. This type of writing can be more effective for some learners, but it is not appropriate for examinations. In the tests, students write about the topic which teachers select. Also, there is a time limitation but under some conditions, human beings may or may not perform well. With the well designed tasks, drafting, feedback and informed choices, process writing supports students in their linguistic improvement (Jordan, 1997). Students can make their own decisions without a model text. However, this approach fails to confront the demands of the real academic world.

There are many writing forms, some are creative, some are not. However, *all writing is creative writing* because writing uses the materials of language, experiences, knowledge, textual sources, personal ideas and imaginings of the writer, bringing out something that did not exist before. All of the writings of students are important and any kind of writing is a creative act (McVey, 2008).

A small scale classroom research was conducted at the English Preparatory School of Maritime University with the students who study one year English programme. The aim was to find an answer to the question 'Can we improve our students' writing skills in English if we apply creative writing techniques as a classroom process?' 35 students in two classes were chosen as the subjects. 19 students were in the experimental group and 16 students were in the control group. They were aged between 18-21. The two groups were treated differently in their writing classes. For example, the control group was studying actual writing scheme while the experimental group was supposed to study both the regular curriculum and creative writing. Students had four fifty minutes writing lessons per week.

First, a criterion for creative writing was developed:

Table 1. *Creative Writing Criteria*

Introduction:	Effective introduction sentence
Content:	New and different (Meyer et al, 2006) Use of imagination
Words:	Adjectives/five sense words (Soytekin, 1998)

Then, a creative writing syllabus to be used with the regular writing syllabus was prepared.

Table 2. *Experimental Group - Creative Writing Studies*

TOPIC (BOOK) The Writing Syllabus:	CREATIVE, CULTURAL and GLOBAL ISSUES	EXTRA TOPIC	ASSIGNMENTS
Describing Appearances	Art / Painting	'The Portrait of Mona Lisa'	Famous Actor / Actress
Describing Places	Art / Painting	Van Gogh's Room	Pink Saloon in Dolmabahçe Palace
Describing Objects	History / Tradition	Turkish Fez	Free Writing
Organizing Information by Order of Importance	Global Issues Social Issues	Natural Resources (Article from reading course)	Important Things in Marriages
Expressing an Opinion	Art / History Social Issues	Renaissance Period	Friendship Websites
Comparing	Fiction / Poetry	Writing a Poem	Similarities of Poetry & Prose
Contrasting	Social / Global Issues Literature	Women in East / Women in West	Graded Readers (Plays, Fiction, Short Story)
Writing Summaries	Literature (Short Story)	Captain Murderer by Charles Dickens	Graded Readers
Cause	Social Issues	Poverty	Free Writing
Effect	Social / Global Issues	Earthquake	Divorce

At the beginning of the term, due to students' limited knowledge, a simple questionnaire was given to the students to understand their attitudes towards the writing course.

The control group studied the skill-based course book and was supposed to study 10 paragraph types in a term. Experimental group studied the course book with the same paragraph types and also wrote extra 10 paragraphs according to the creative writing syllabus and the feedback was given according to the criteria set before the study started. The procedure was as follows:

Power Point Presentations: Periodically, three types of power point presentations were prepared, one projecting the good paragraphs and sentences of the students, the other, projecting the common errors of the papers and lastly, new structures were reflected on the screen to be shared and discussed as a whole class.

Feedback on Paper: The correct parts of the students' papers were highlighted which was beneficial for them to see their abilities more than their failures.

Peer feedback: Students commented on each other's work.

Students rewrote the second drafts according to the feedback, they put the final copies of the paragraphs into their portfolio. The teacher and the students decided on the papers that would be in the classbook. The purpose was to keep the records of a collection of the outstanding works of students in an organized way.

At the end of the term, an improved questionnaire was given to the experimental group of students to see if there is any change in their attitudes towards the writing course.

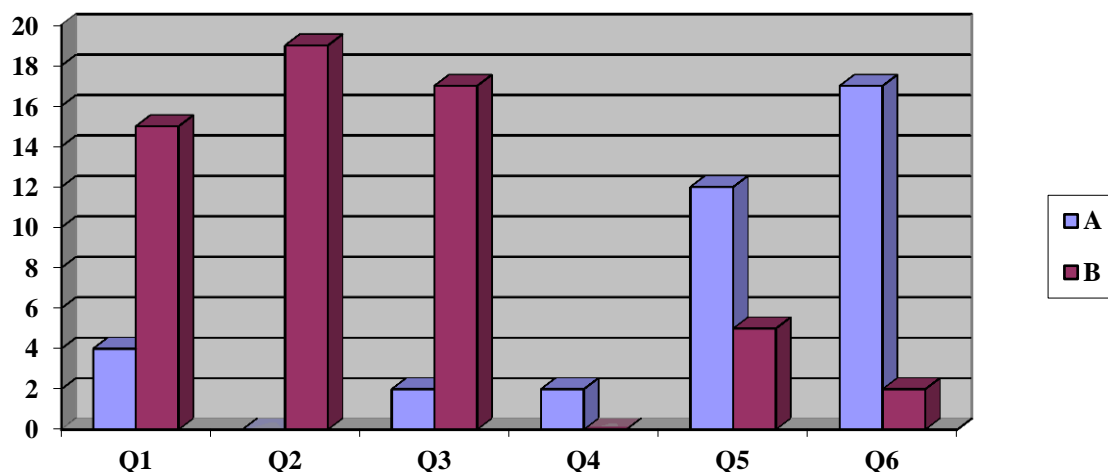
In a term, students were required to take two midterm exams. Students were asked to write a paragraph about the given topic in the exams. The papers were marked by two instructors according to the rubric set at the beginning of the year.

To gain a better understanding of the developmental creative writing techniques, three types of datas were analysed. The first one was the questionnaire to compare the pre and post perspective of students. The second element was the collecting of the exam results to see the success and the third one was the students' portfolios.

1. Attitude Questionnaire Analysis (pre)

The questionnaire had 6 questions and each question had two choices. The results were analyzed question by question.

Table 3. *Attitude Questionnaire Results*

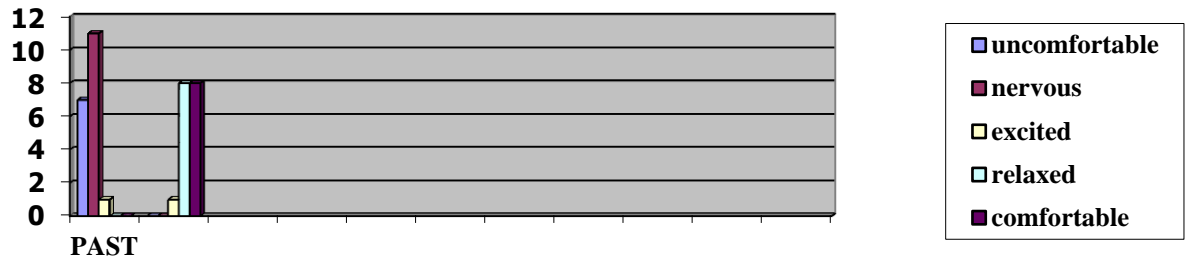


The answers of the questionnaire indicated that students' common attitudes were negative towards writing. As the first three questions prove, their writing experiences were limited. In the first question, 15 students out of 19 marked the same choice as b which shows their disinterest. The second question also revealed that all of the students do not write even as a hobby. 17 students out of 19, which was a considerable number, do not like writing. Only 2 of them are interested in writing as it was shown in question three. Apart from the previous questions, the third question had diversified answers which were numbered as question 4 and question 5. The students, who had positive response, were required to answer question 4. The rest of the students with negative approach, were required to answer question 5. According to their answers, out of 19 students, 2 students answered question 4 and 17 students answered question 5. For the last question, it is obvious that experimental group do not often write by themselves unless it was necessary.

At the end of the term, an improved questionnaire with 10 questions was given to students after the creative writing studies. The questions were designed to reveal students' opinions regarding their recent attitudes towards writing. The results were analyzed question by question. All the questions had categorical responses with 5 different degrees. Each question

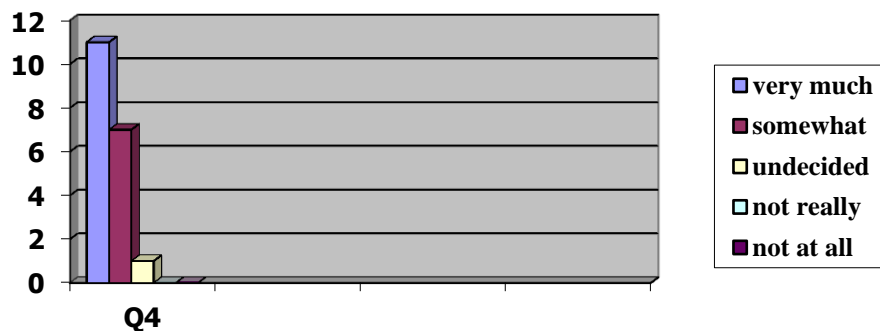
had different values. The given values for the question 1 were, uncomfortable (5), nervous (4), excited (3), relaxed (2), and comfortable (1). The tables given below show the analysis of each question:

Table 4. *The Analysis of the First Two Questions*



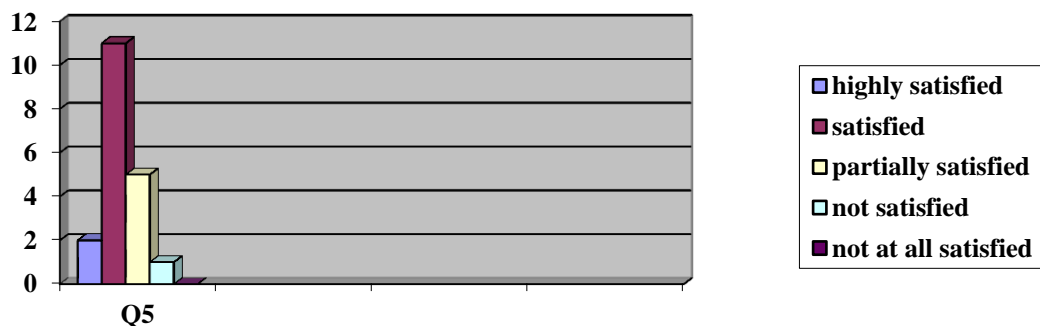
As it can be inferred from the chart, for the first question, which was about students' past writing attitudes, the most preferred answers were uncomfortable, nervous, and excited. The answers of students for the second question, which was about students's recent writing attitudes, the most preferred answers were comfortable, relaxed, and excited. When these two questions were compared, students' past and recent feelings were significantly different.

Table 5. *The Analysis of Question 4*



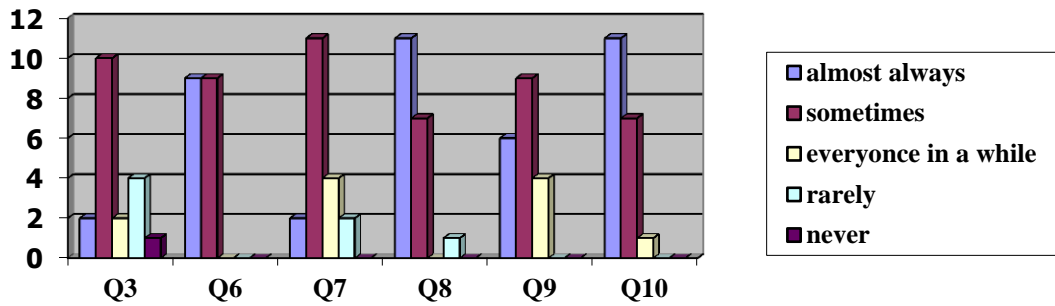
Question 4 indicates the satisfaction of the most students in terms of their language production.

Table 6. *The Analysis of Question 5*



Question 5 shows that students satisfied with the writing studies. For some of the students writing still is not their favourite subject. However, when we compare this result with the attitude of students at the beginning, it is not worse. Infact, it was realistic.

Table 7. *The Analysis of Questions 3-6-7-8-9-10*

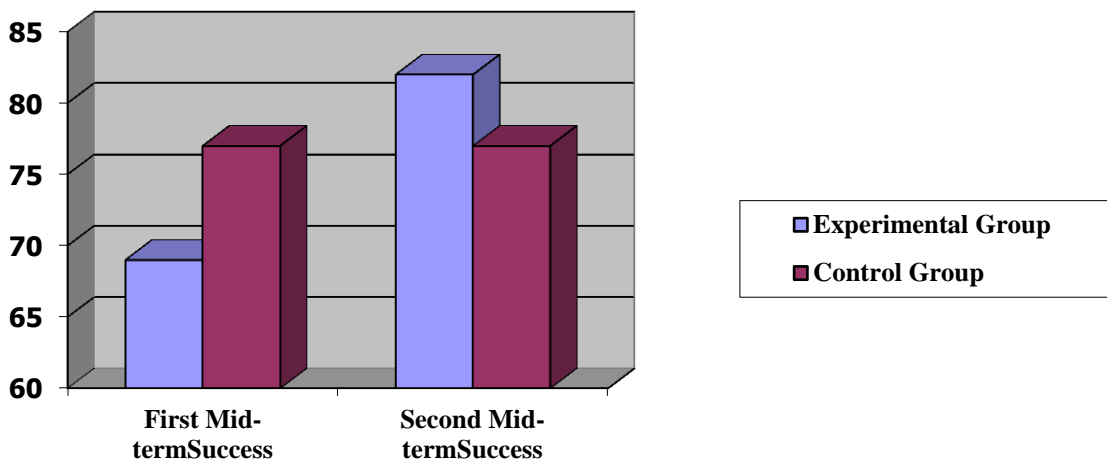


Third question, clarifies that students were not fond of the standard writing activities of the book. Questions number 6 and 10 reflected students’ self awareness. They showed that students can organize and express their ideas. Regarding questions 7/8/9, creative writing affected speaking as well as grammar and reading. The averages were close to ‘almost always’ which had 5 as the highest value.

2. Exam Results

The analysis was done by comparing the exam results of the Experimental and the Control groups. The findings are noteworthy from the table below. Although the Control group was better in the first exam, there was no change in the second exam. The results of both exams of the Control group were satisfactory but no development was observed. On the contrary, Experimental group was worse than the Control group in the first exam results. However, there was an important development in their second scores after creative writing studies. It was higher than the scores of the Control group. The exam results indicated a significant difference between the two groups in terms of writing skills and language development.

Table 8. *Overview of the Exams in terms of Percentages*



The total scores are out of 100.

A Paired sample t-test was used to calculate the growth of both the Experimental and the Control group and to compare each of the groups. The observation was done relatively. Experimental and the Control groups’ exam scores were tested individually. The value that is significant for us is the difference between the scores of the Mid-term 1 and Mid-term 2. in this paired t-test with null hypothesis mean = 0, and alternative hypothesis mean < 0. Means

of Experimental and Control groups on different parts of the test are demonstrated in the tables below:

Table 9. *The Results of the Mid-term 1 and Midterm 2*

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
The Experimental Group*	- 1,25789	19	12,59328
The Control Group**	- 75000	16	6,11555

*Experimental Group Midterm 1-2

** Control Group Midterm 1-2

T-test results indicate that experimental group ($M= -1.25$, $SD= 12.59$) got significantly higher scores in the second exam than the control group ($M= -0.75$, $SD= 6.1$). The averages of both groups are different. To analyse whether it was a random or a real fact, see the following table.

Table 10. *Exam Averages of Both Groups*

	T	Sig.(2- tailed)
The Experimental Group	- 4,354	000
The Control Group	- 491	613

The total marks of the experimental group ($M=-1.25$, $SD=12.59$) were significantly higher than the control group ($M=-0.75$, $SD=6.1$), $t= - 4,354$, $p=.000$.

According to the results, as hypothesized, the creative writing training had a positive effect on students' writing skills. There is a significant difference between the Experimental and the Control groups. The results reveal that the Experimental group benefited highly from the study.

In conclusion, the question 'Can we improve our students' writing skills in English if we apply creative writing techniques as a classroom process?' was answered positively. Further research is needed to prove the effectiveness of creative writing in EFL classes.

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