【Practical Report】

Let's Get Creative!

Considerations for an English Creative Writing Module in Japanese Universities

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Abstract

The purpose of this report is to examine some of the considerations that must be undertaken when devising and redrafting an English language creative writing textbook for Japanese university-level ESL students. Through theoretical and literary research, this report explores how activities and processes that are common in native English creative writing classes can be adapted for learners who would be not only using a second language (L2), but who are also unlikely to have experienced any creative writing education at all. A key consideration is how this textbook can be implemented to use English as a medium of instruction (EMI) to teach creative writing.

Key words: creative writing, fiction prose, scriptwriting, critical analysis, textbook production, EMI

1. Introduction

Every autumn semester, the English Center at Gifu University offers an Advanced Writing elective module, open to students of all departments. Previously, this had taken the guise of a content-based instruction (CBI) curriculum focusing on essay construction, with grammar development and error correction a key objective. Starting in the autumn 2023 semester, this will change to an EMI creative writing class, for which the author of this paper will design and develop an original textbook. The proposed textbook, *Let's Get Creative!* will cover a fifteen-week semester and be divided into three five-week sections: story writing, scriptwriting, and critical analysis. Each section of the textbook comprises of three developmental lessons and two peer

review and redrafting lessons. This report discusses how the story writing section—separated into *Unit 1: Genre and Plot*, *Unit 2: Exploring Character*, *Unit 3: Story Development*—was developed, and what challenges were faced in its production.

2. Background Information

To assist in highlighting issues that Japanese learners might encounter when faced with a creative writing class in L2, this section will offer a brief insight into English writing education in Japan, how students may or may not implement that learning, and how they may have experienced creative writing in the classroom. It will also discuss why creative writing is a useful tool for ESL university students.

English and Creative Writing in Japan

English writing in Japanese education is almost entirely functional and based around grammar and practicing textual understanding (Kamata & Guenther, 2013). Furthermore, as Japan belongs to Kachru's (1985) *Model of World English's Expanding Circle*, students rarely have opportunities to practice English outside of the classroom. This leads to a negative relationship between anxiety and a willingness to communicate (Koga, 2010; Yashima, 2002) cementing student impressions that skillsets are insufficient for communication. However, by the time they begin university education, students will have had a minimum of six years of formal English education, though when it comes to writing, it is unlikely that they will have had occasion to write creatively (Thompson, 2013). In fact, not only is creative writing seldom-if-ever taught in English classes, but it is also rarely even taught in Japanese classes, due to a persistent belief that writing talent is innate (Madeen & Sugimoto, 2019).

Why Creative Writing?

Aside from test-taking and general classroom activities, many students may conclude that English has little or no practical use to them other than for university entrance exams and then receiving university credits. To examine this supposition, the author quizzed 10 first-year university classes about the percentage of English vocabulary they retained after studying for university entrance exams. Despite having spent many hours memorizing vocabulary the previous year, the majority claimed to have retained less than 50 percent. These quizzes were informal and in a classroom setting with a raising of hands, and are therefore not rigorous enough to be statistically accountable. However, the results create the impression that for many students English is something that is picked up when required, and then forgotten when it is of no longer of practical use. Consequently, in order to successfully navigate—or even alter—this mindset,

"what is needed in tertiary English education is to give learners opportunities to access their knowledge and to produce English in meaningful contexts as often as possible" (Ike & Nishi 2013, p 502).

This necessity could be considered the reason for the increase of EMI courses worldwide, with the number of bachelor and master's degrees in Europe taught entirely in English climbing from 725 in 2001 to 8,089 in 2014 (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). Implementing classroom learning through EMI, described as "an umbrella term for academic subjects taught through English" because there is "no direct reference to the aim of improving students' English" (Dearden & Macaro, 2016, p. 456), can enhance the notion that learning is taking place within meaningful contexts, as students receive no evaluation of their language ability, and all consequences rely on the application of skills that are learned in the classroom. In the case of a creative writing course, students produce a tangible body of work the like of which can as be witnessed in global culture, and though they will recognise the minimal likelihood of their work being reproduced in a societal setting, they may recognise the practical uses of skills they gained better than the straightforward memorisation of vocabulary and grammatical rules that they are used to.

3. Engagement

As "the chief obstacle to adopting EMI coursework at Japanese universities seems to be the low English language proficiency of many Japanese students" (Strong, 2019, p. 3), the first consideration when writing a textbook that utilises work of this kind is that it must be applicable for students of potentially low comprehension levels. This issue is compounded when dealing with a subject in which experience is lacking in both L1 and L2, meaning that a variety of techniques are required, starting with engagement arousal. Here, it is imperative that opening activities are simple enough that all students can easily participate, no matter their level, boosting confidence in students whilst gently guiding them into the topic at hand. As Barker (2018, p. 184) notes, "Most students appear to believe that they have 'failed' at learning English […] so it is crucial to persuade them that this new challenge is one at which they have a chance of success." As such, Activity 1 of *Unit 1: Genre and Plot* simply asks students to consider a story that they like, Activity 1 of *Unit 2: Exploring Character* requires students to identify well-known characters from Japanese popular culture, and Activity 1 of *Unit 3: Story Development* merely asks students to think about their previous day in relation to their senses. To make the requirements unambiguously apparent, all activities begin with model answers (*fig. 1*).

Another consideration towards engagement is in how much of the vocabulary is directly aimed at the reader, with activity introduction utilising first person plural imperatives such as "Let's talk about stories", and guidance such as "You will learn how to…", phrases that are

intended to encourage the student to recognise their shared investment and development. This steers away from the more abstract and disengaged language that can often be found in textbooks. Furthermore, in initial drafts, key vocabulary essential to the subject of creative writing—such as ‘genre,’ ‘character,’ and ‘common tropes’—were introduced through unwieldly explanations. In the redrafting process, it was decided that these were likely to bemuse lower-level students, and so a glossary was added at the beginning of the unit. While this may go somewhat against the strictest of definitions of an EMI lesson, it was considered a necessary step to ensure that all students were smoothly able to grasp key concepts and thus transition into the required skillsets.

3. Upskilling

Following engagement, the next step is to impart upon the students the requisite information and skills to enable them to carry out the targeted aim, in this case writing a short story of their own creation. Crucial to this is a steady build up of activities that continually add to students’ understanding. This can be seen in *Unit 2: Character Development* (*figs 2-5*), where identifying traits in popular characters advances to the development of an original character, culminating in a full character description.

A further addition in later drafts was the inclusion of an extension activity, in which higher-level students are given more freedom to come up with character traits of their own, something that would further develop their understanding of the process, though would potentially be beyond the capabilities of the average student. These extension activities are laced throughout the textbook to give teachers flexibility, something that can be a concern in unstreamed classes in which English abilities fluctuate.

4. Putting into Practice

Scaffolding

According to Madeen and Sakimoto, (2019), Japan is the world leader in terms of “Strong Uncertainty Avoidance”, meaning that by far and away the most important consideration when devising a textbook for ESL learners of varying levels is instructional scaffolding, as championed by Vygotsky (1978). This concept has inspired the most rigorous editing in the drafting process, whether it be the addition of example answers for all activities, or the reallocation of brainstorming and free-hand activities to expansion activities so that they can be replaced with more structured activities and word banks such as Genre Activity 3 (*fig. 6*), and Character Activities 1 and 4 (*figs. 2, 4 and 5*).

Gradual Release of Responsibility

Also known as 'I do, we do, you do', gradual release of responsibility (GRR) is a strategy that Buehl (2005, online) believed "emphasises instruction that mentors students into becoming capable thinkers and learners when handling the tasks with which they have not yet developed expertise," and after the redrafting process, this has been utilised at the culmination of each unit of the textbook. For example, original drafts of *Unit 1: Genre and Plot* informed students of the various points of The Story Mountain (*fig. 7)*, an adapted version of Freytag's Pyramid (Freytag, 1881), asked them to locate those points in the folklore tale *Momotaro*, before then instructing them to develop a Story Mountain of their own. However, it was felt that this may be daunting for many students, and as such the GRR technique was introduced by including Activities 5, 6 and 7. In the first of these, students match the Story Mountain stages to plot points in *Momotato* (I Do). Then, in Activity 6 (*fig. 8)*, they work with a partner or group to develop a plot from one of two established beginnings (We Do), the use of two options giving students agency to develop an idea in which they may have interest or possess knowledge, engendering greater engagement levels. Finally, once students are accustomed to the task at hand, they are instructed in their homework to develop a plot of their own (You Do).

5. Conclusion

The process of developing an EMI-based textbook teaching creative writing to Japanese university-level students is far from straightforward. However, through the implementation of established pedagogical theory and research into the development of original activities, combined with a careful observance of the language required to reach its diverse target audience, the belief is that the production of a well-crafted textbook is well under way. The next step is to carry out lesson trials in autumn 2023 and, should they be successful, put the full textbook into construction in time for the 2024 autumn semester.

With the addition of an EMI-based creative writing course implemented within the Advanced Writing elective, students will have the opportunity to not only build upon their English skills, but more importantly uncover new skillsets that enable them to use English in more meaningful contexts. Furthermore, these capabilities may become established skills that are transferrable into their native language, maybe convincing them that creative writing is not as innate as it is sometimes believed, but rather it is in fact a teachable skill. In addition, having gained new expertise in a second language, perhaps they will recognise that English is not simply a tool to be discarded once they have received their credits, but instead a gateway into a new world of abilities and skillsets.

Appendix

Activity 1
Think about a story that you know well. It could be a novel, a movie, a TV show, or a manga that you like. Answer the following questions.

	Example	**Your idea**
What story do you like?	*Harry Potter*	
What did you like about it?	*The magic is exciting.*	
What else did you like about it?	*Hermione is very cool.*	

Fig. 1

	Name	**M/F/Other**	**Appearance**	**Personality**	**Strengths/ weaknesses**	**Aim/Desire**
Ex.	*Kintaro*	Male	Short, long black hair, big muscles	Kind, a leader	Very powerful, good swimmer/ proud	To become a great warrior
1		Other	Blue, no ears, looks like a cat	Friendly, helpful	Tools like dokodemodoor / Afraid of mice	To help Nobita to become a more successful person
2		Male	Straw hat, red t-shirt	Brave, kind, funny	Expandable arms, good fighter / Can't swim	To become a pirate king

Fig. 2

Activity 2
Now, think of a character that you know well from a story – it could be a novel, a movie, a TV show or an anime – and fill in the blanks, ***but not the name***. Next, share it with your partner. Can they guess who the character is?

	Name	M/F/Other	Appearance	Personality	Strengths/ weaknesses	Aim/Desire
1	?????????					

Fig. 3

Activity 4
Now it's time to build ***an original*** character for your story. Choose at least one option from each section. You can add your own ideas in the blank spaces if you want. When you have finished, give your character a name.
Example:

	Home	**Age**	**Job**	**Aim/Desire**
Basics	Countryside	Child	Detective	To save the world
	City	Teenager	Student	To fall in love
	Another planet	Adult	Pilot	To solve a mystery
	Edo, Japan			

Basics	**Home**	**Age**	**Job**	**Aim/Desire**
	Countryside	Child	Detective	To save the world
	City	Teenager	School child	To fall in love
	Another planet	Adult	Pilot	To solve a mystery
Appearance	**Hair color**	**Body shape**	**Clothing**	**Face**
	Black	Tall and thin	Fashionable	Beautiful
	Blonde	Short and round	Normal	Ugly
	Pink	Athletic	Crazy	Scars
Personality	**Intelligence**	**Fear**	**Favourite…**	**Least favourite…**
	Genius	Ghosts	Food: ramen	Time: morning
	Average	Spiders	Music: J-pop	Colour: green
	Stupid	Never find love	Person: mother	Person: evil uncle
Around them	**Friends**	**Family**	**Enemy/rival**	**Environment**
	Best friend	Mother	Evil genius	Another world
	Girl/boyfriend	Father	Love rival	Countryside
	Club members	Twin sister	Ghost	City
Background	**Education**	**Achievement**	**Happiest memory**	**Traumatic memory**
	High school	Won Koshien	Meeting girl/boyfriend	Child dying
	No school	Saved the world	Mother's kindness	World exploding
	University	Can ride a motorbike	First time in space	Breaking up with their sweetheart
Anything else	**Important item or tool**	**Vehicle**	**Special ability**	**Weakness**
	Gun	Speed boat	Very intelligent	Can't swim
	Magic wand	Bicycle	Can fly	Easily stressed
	Cell phone	Mercedes Benz	Everyone loves them	Too trusting

Figs. 4&5

Activity 3

Here are some well-known genres. Match the genre to their common tropes and settings. Use your dictionary for any words you do not know.

action romance horror comedy sci-fi
fantasy historical ~~mystery~~ biography

1. *mystery*	2.	3.	4.	5.
Mysterious murder	Magic and special powers	Far away planets	Set in the past	Boy meets girl
Clever detective	Other worlds and creatures	Aliens	Battles with swords	Love triangle
Following clues	Characters on a quest	Spaceship battles	Royal families etc,	Heartbreak
Surprising ending	Elves, goblins, and orcs	The future	Political or social change	Love conquers all

6.	7.	8.	9.
Zombies	Gun fights	Follows one character's life	Slapstick
Ghosts	Explosions	Traumatic childhood	Characters use funny remarks
Revenge	Car chase	Life changing events	Silly accidents
Bad guy who won't die	Strong hero	Character successes and failures	Absurd situation gets worse

Fig. 6

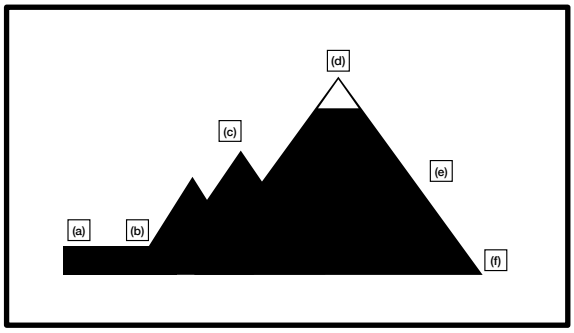
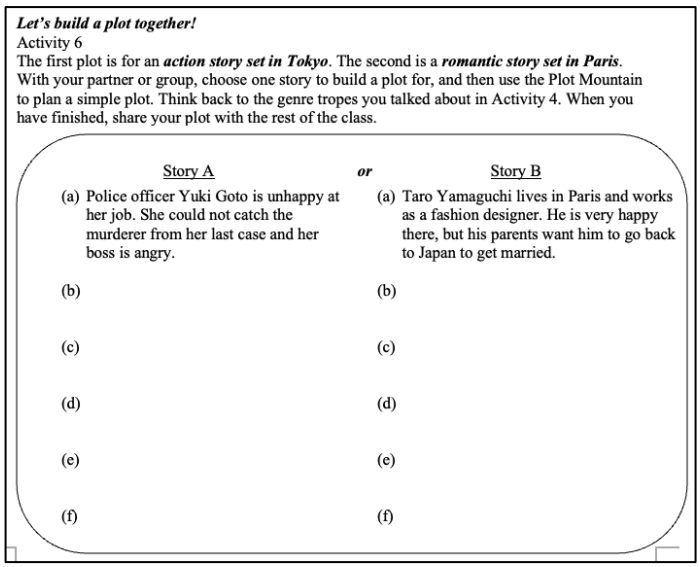


Fig. 7



Let's build a plot together!
Activity 6
The first plot is for an ***action story set in Tokyo***. The second is a ***romantic story set in Paris***. With your partner or group, choose one story to build a plot for, and then use the Plot Mountain to plan a simple plot. Think back to the genre tropes you talked about in Activity 4. When you have finished, share your plot with the rest of the class.

Story A	*or*	Story B
(a) Police officer Yuki Goto is unhappy at her job. She could not catch the murderer from her last case and her boss is angry.		(a) Taro Yamaguchi lives in Paris and works as a fashion designer. He is very happy there, but his parents want him to go back to Japan to get married.
(b)		(b)
(c)		(c)
(d)		(d)
(e)		(e)
(f)		(f)

Fig 8.

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