

# Using Creative Writing with Associate Degree Students to Foster Creativity and Agency

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to argue that using English literary works by Chinese writers in creative writing tasks is a powerful way to motivate Associate Degree students in Hong Kong. For such students who have failed to enter university and struggle with both English and self-esteem, reading poetry by Chinese writers in English and a Creative Non-fiction narrative, which reflects their personal, academic, and socio-cultural challenges, encourages their engagement with English. We believe that response through creative writing supports their development of a sense of agency in English language learning.

**Keywords:** Asian English literature; agency; creativity; creative writing

## Introduction

Associate Degree (AD) was introduced to Hong Kong in 2000, offered by most local universities in Hong Kong. ADs, a two-year programme, are generally regarded as equivalent to the formerly more common three-year higher diplomas but ‘inferior’ to the government-funded university degrees (Kember, 2010). Each year sees about 20,000 students graduating from the AD programmes, who then compete with other secondary school graduates for the very limited government-funded places for different bachelor’s degrees (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2001; Kember, 2010). The paper is based on our experience in teaching an AD course, Critical Reading Skills (through Literature), at a local community college, Community College of City University (CCCU).

Until recently, most Hong Kong secondary school students did not study English literature or any literature in English. Before the advent of the new 3-3-4 approach to curriculum in Hong Kong, most secondary students had a limited opportunity to interact with creative texts in English, with students in Band 1 or international schools being the only exceptions (Burton, 2003 & 2010). Many AD students have had little or no exposure to literature or creative writing. Out of the 149 students surveyed from the College’s AD programmes English for Professional Communication (EPC) and Bilingual Communication Studies (BCS) programmes (in October 2011 and February 2012 respectively), only 16 students had taken English literature in secondary school. There may be several reasons for this situation. The pressure from open examinations discourages secondary school teachers from choosing creative texts and tasks along with the pragmatic goal of maintaining ‘high standards of academic achievement’ (Burton, 2010, p. 500). In addition, some educators believe that creativity has a dark side (Cropley, Cropley, Kaufman & Runco, 2010). Local teachers in Hong Kong have reservations about encouraging creativity in

their students because some may associate creativity with socially undesirable traits (Chan & Chan, 1999). That may also discourage educators from employing creative tasks and encouraging creativity in the language classroom. The students graduating from secondary school before the advent of the new senior secondary curriculum in 2009 were rarely exposed to creative writing tasks through literature or other related courses because these students had to spend most of their time reviewing past papers and drilling for exams.

At CCCU, the course upon which we conducted our research, Critical Reading Skills (through Literature), is offered to students in language studies programmes. When one of the writers of this paper, Kate Rogers, was appointed Course Coordinator over five years ago, she revamped the course materials by replacing the formerly pre-dominantly Western canon with Asian English literature and introducing creative writing tasks in the curriculum. Our aim is to increase students' independence and foster agency and creativity by giving them the opportunity to develop their sense of ownership of the English language, i.e., making English their own language. The pedagogical value of this change will be discussed later in this paper for the Asian writers' works have proved to be of great use in fostering our learners' agency and creativity in our course.

We believe that our creative writing tasks for AD students will have continued relevance to students who have been exposed to some literature under the new curriculum. Also, we should continue to nurture their creativity and sense of agency. Two reasons for the use of creative texts and tasks in the AD English classroom will be presented here: enhancing agency and fostering creativity. Both will be discussed and illustrated with evidence in the section following the literature review.

## **Literature Review**

Studies on the influence of creative writing on the development of creativity and agency at tertiary level in Hong Kong have not been researched to our knowledge. This has been confirmed with our recent searches in the academic databases, Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) and ProQuest Education Journals, in January 2013.

The main agenda behind this paper is our belief in the benefits of enhancing agency through fostering creativity. While the notions of agency and creativity are not new to learning theorists and language educators, a review of those concepts is useful for providing a framework for our discussion.

### ***Agency***

We have adopted sociocultural theorists Lantolf and Thorne's (2006) definition of agency. They define agency as the 'ability to assign relevance and significance to things and events', as well as an individual's 'voluntary control over behavior' (pp. 142–143). We assume that 'learning a language is necessarily the action of an intentional agent' (p. 142). In other words, language students must have a sense of agency and exercise it. This implies that educators should ensure that 'each outcome of a local action and operation [in language education] should enhance an individual's sense of agency' (pp. 239–240).

Meanwhile, Bakhtin views language and its socio-cultural contexts as evolving entities. He sees it being renewed through social activity, and the main way by which we shape our worlds for our own purposes (Hall, Vitanova, & Marchenkova, 2005) create a dialogue between the texts and the student readers, in part through a creative task modelled after a course text. Mahoney (1990) points out that that dialogue can be supported by using literature by Asian writers in English:

When Asian students read Asian English literature, they are able to engage in a dialogue with their own cultures. Through this dialogue they are able to reflect upon their own society and their own lives ... the focus is very much more upon a relevant, dynamic, and potentially transforming dialogue between reader and text. The issues raised in Asian-English literature are often living issues for the Asian reader. (para. 1)

Lin and Luk (2005, p. 83) ask, ‘How do English language teaching practices in Hong Kong schools both reflect and enact the ideological domination of English?’ The use of English-language literary works by Chinese writers to teach literature and language can work to counter such domination. In our creative writing tasks in a college literature course, we support students’ sense of agency by encouraging them to create original metaphors in English language poetry and a reflective memoir in which they express their feelings about life. The course Critical Reading Skills (through Literature), inspiration for this paper, facilitates students’ reshaping their educational habitus, in other words, how they interact with English and their learning environment, as coined by Bourdieu (Webb, Schirato & Danaher, 2002). AD students can begin to transform their habitus and express their unique realities by responding to such texts in a creative manner. They also begin to transform their relationship with English and their personal and cultural identities (Lin & Luk, 2005). Their active participation in the learning process through written creative self-expression helps them to ‘assign relevance and significance to things and events’ and gives them ‘voluntary control over behaviour’ (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, pp. 142–143).

What is more, the study of English through the English literary works of Chinese writers changes students’ relationship with English. It transforms English from a language of challenge outside much of their daily experience into one which can be made their own. Reading an essay about Hong Kong writer Xu Xi’s secondary school challenges helps students write about their own experience and engages their personal schemata as well. Students’ use of pre-existing schemata makes the cultural context of those texts a bridge to a new relationship with English.

Creative responses of two students to the Creative Non-fiction essay, *Et Tu Mon Pere*, by Xu Xi will be explored as evidence showing that their sense of agency was enhanced through creative writing tasks.

### ***Creativity***

Although ‘creativity’ has not been clearly defined (Burton, 2010), we assume that creativity is a process rather than a product (Runco, 2010). Through that process, students can exercise their agency and strengthen that muscle. Cropley (2010), in his discussion of various perspectives on creativity, quotes previous researchers’ positive descriptions of creativity. They see it as ‘the pathway to “living your own life your own way”’ (Moustakis, 1977, as cited in Cropley, 2010, p. 307), and ““resistance” to

socialization' (Barron, 1969, as cited in Cropley, *ibid.*). These discussions of creativity connect closely with the definition of agency we have adopted for this paper since students have the opportunity to share their own feelings and experience in English and thereby reshape their habitus for learning the language. In fact, reshaping their habitus could be seen as part of their creative process.

Creative self-expression in English enhances students' sense of agency and helps them transform their habitus. The use of creative tasks and assessments in a language through literature course supports that process: A creative task can be defined as open-ended problem solving, adapted to the abilities of the participants and conducted under constraints (Amabile, 1983, 1996; Kim, 1990; Lubart, 1994 as cited in Burton, 2010.) Such tasks can therefore be used to assess the creative ability of the participants (Amabile, 1983, 1996; Maker, 2004, as cited in Burton 2010, p .496). They can also be used to generate a creative process in the classroom and facilitate the uptake of new ideas, such as learning a language (Collie & Slater, 1987; Carter & McCarthy, 1995, as cited in Burton, 2010, p. 496).

Studying the English language poetry, fiction and Creative Non-fiction of Chinese writers can help AD students reflect on their relationship with English. Giving students the opportunity to respond creatively to such texts enhances their sense of agency.

## **Methodology**

This paper reports on a qualitative study which investigated how some creative writing tasks contributed to the development of agency among AD students. Our inquiry drew insights from three students' creative writing for textual analysis. A poem by one of the above students is further analyzed. This paper also considers creative responses of two BCS students to the creative non-fiction piece, *Et Tu Mon Pere*, by Hong Kong writer, Xu Xi. They were written for an assessment in the AD literary reading course Critical Reading Skills (through Literature). Two students from two CCCU language studies programmes, one from the EPC programme and the other from the BCS programme, were also interviewed to determine the role of creative writing in fostering their creativity and agency. These students were chosen because of the relevance of their individual experience to our inquiries.

## **Results and Discussion**

This section discusses how learners' agency and creativity was fostered through their interaction with the creative texts in the critical reading skills course.

### ***Creative Non-fiction***

Creative non-fiction is like fiction in many respects. It has a plot and other literary devices such as metaphor, but the fact that it is a true story makes it even more meaningful to students as a model (Gerard, 1996). In the following section we will describe why and how we use an Asian writer's creative non-fiction memoir in English to trigger students' creative response. We will use excerpts from some students' work to demonstrate how this approach fosters students' creativity.

*The Work of Xu Xi*

In *Et Tu Mon Pere*, a creative non-fiction memoir about the challenges during her secondary school life in 1960's Hong Kong, Xu Xi relates how she lost control of her fate in Form 4. Xu Xi was a gifted arts student who loved reading fiction such as Richardson's Pamela and was inspired by her Literature teacher, Mrs. Liao. At 14, Xu Xi had her English stories published in the South China Morning Post, but her results in math and science were not good. Xu Xi (2008) uses metaphor to describe her mother's reaction:

*Meanwhile, at home, Vesuvius erupted. Ma mere was livid. There I was, fourteen, report card in hand with an average result—great in some subjects, okay in others, not so good in Science and Math, thanks to the exigencies of the coefficient of heat and the x-y-z of Algebra.*

Later, against her expectations, Xu Xi's father, who had been her 'trump card', did not support her. Xu Xi was forced to take science and switched in Form 5 (p. 22).

Studying *Et Tu Mon Pere*, supports a key response in students' own creative writing: redefinition of problems (Cropley, 1992). Reading *Et Tu Mon Pere* causes students to reflect on their own lives. In addition, the creative writing assessment activates the following cognitive (and creative) processes, as first developed by the psychologist Necka (1986):

1. Forming associations
  2. Recognizing similarities
  3. Constructing metaphors
  4. Carrying out transformations
  5. Selectively directing one's own attention
  6. Seeing the abstract aspects of the concrete
- (as cited in Cropley, 1992)

The story *Et Tu Mon Pere* by Xu Xi gives students an opportunity to read about a pivotal moment in the protagonist's life when she lost control of her studies. It has similarities with the time when the AD students failed to get into university from secondary school. For AD students, who failed to enter university by JUPAS (Joint University Programmes Admissions System) and who struggle with self-expression in English, using Xu Xi's 'true story' about personal and academic challenges in Hong Kong engages them and acts as a catalyst for their own reflection and creative process. In their own reflective essay about coping with discouraging results on their A Levels and their lack of university offers, students use *Et Tu Mon Pere* as a model. They create personal metaphors for their emotions and those of family and friends during this period and use them in their story. Responding in a creative way with their own story helps them to change how they relate to English: their expectations and assumptions—their habitus.

For the assessment, students use Xu Xi's story as a model for their own creative non-fiction reflection about their secondary school life. They must form associations between actions and results (creating a plot), see similarities between Xu Xi's loss of personal choice and their own as AD students who did not get into university through

the Joint University Programmes Admissions System (JUPAS), and create their own metaphors to express their experience. The students' stories are told from a first person point of view, but in the voice of someone who has observed them. This approach thus transforms their perspective on their problems while they focus their attention and find abstract patterns in their concrete experience.

Through the transformative process of creative reflection and self-expression, students create something new for themselves: a fresh perspective on their failure in secondary school (Boden, 2004, as cited in Burton, 2010), with the aim to enhancing students' sense of agency as they find meaning in their life experience and exercise some control over the outcome in the plot of a creative non-fiction story (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

### Students' Creative Responses

Lin and Luk (as cited in Hall et al., 2005) contend that, 'for one to really accept, acquire and own a language or discourse, it has to become an *internally persuasive discourse*, hybridized and populated with one's own voices, styles, meanings and intentions ...' (pp. 93–94). Writing a narrative, reflective personal essay, modelled after *Et Tu Mon Pere*, helps students borrow and reshape the words of a role model for their own purposes, enhancing their sense of agency in the process.

Here are several excerpts from the first of the two reflective student essays chosen for this paper. They were selected because students met the criteria for the assignment well. These two examples show evidence of changing habitus for both students.

Paragraphs and excerpts of paragraphs are featured in consecutive order.

#### *I Believe ...*

*I will never forget the day, the day my daughter told me that she wanted to repeat form 7. It was an anomalous morning. My only daughter, Y, was standing in front of my door. My daughter usually studies in the living room during examination period every early morning, but not for this time. She hesitated for a moment, but soon she told me her decision, 'Dad, I want to repeat form 7.'*

(Student Y's Essay—The identity of the following student has been concealed at her request. The initial 'Y' is used to represent her—which is not related to her name.)

#### Analysis

We can see that the living conditions of Student Y makes studying at home difficult. Bourdieu has argued that a student's existing habitus can even have a profound effect on how, when, and where that person does homework (Rogers, 2012; Webb, Schirato & Danaher, 2002). In Student Y's reflective story written in response to *Et Tu Mon Pere*, the narrator, Student Y's father, refers to the difficulty of Student Y having to sleep and do her homework in the family's common area:

*Y loves Chinese History very much; she takes great pride in it .... She always goes to the public library as her refuge of study. It is because she does not have her own room, she does everything in the living room, for example studying, playing computer and*

*sleeping. Sometimes we could see her discontented face after we went back home at night. After that, she might go to the library or public study room to continue her study.*

The library as a ‘refuge’ means a source of shelter for Student Y. She uses a metaphor identical to Xu Xi’s volcano, but in an original way, describing her own flow of ‘lava’ when her parents disturb her studies. Writing about that situation has helped Student Y use English to describe her personal challenges and thereby express herself creatively in English:

*If we asked her anything, even from the questions of ‘what do you want to eat’ to ‘how is your study’ during her study time, she will erupt, picking up her white note with her red hand. And then we just like a refugee, seeking our refuge and trying not to be hit by the lava. She is too sensitive when she is concentrating to her study, especially during that A-Level Examination period. We knew one of the reasons; she was disdained by my brothers and sisters after they knew that my daughter could not enter university. Moreover, she has repeated her form 7 from last year; I could feel her anxious from her numbers of behaviour. For example, eat more than before, always looking to the clock.*

In the assignment, the student writes about her experience from the point of view of someone who knows her. Through writing the reflective essay, she has a chance to relate her experience with failure—as an observer, and also practise the literary device of point of view. At the same time she is coming to terms with that experience. The writing process is likely to help her adjust her perceptions of negative experiences: ‘by writing, individuals adapt to their hassles and problems’ (Runco, 2009, p. 184). This also aligns with Lin and Luk’s contention that ‘English can become a language populated with students’ own voices and become a tool that students can use to construct their own preferred worlds, preferred identities and preferred voices’ (p. 94). We can see from the student’s example how she expresses her identity using her new-found creative voices in English and how her sense of agency is enhanced.

An essay by a CCCU BCS student, Katherine (a pseudonym), shows how her ‘voice’ and creative self-expression can be part of the tools she uses to redefine herself. By using English to do this, she is also changing her relationship with the language and how she learns it—her habitus. The following excerpt from Katherine’s reflective essay demonstrates this:

*I still remembered the scene when Katherine was Primary 6. Father pushed her to join many piano competitions. When she had to choose secondary school, father insisted mother to choose a band 1 school focusing strongly on Music. Every year’s exam results, father was always not contented because of the B in English but E in Music. Then, 5 years later in Form 5, Katherine only got 13 marks in HKCE exam. She failed Music. Father insisted her to repeat Form 5. However, in fact, Katherine did not want to study in that school anymore. She intended to focus on English rather than Music. Mother persuaded father many times. But father disdained her opinion and kept bribing her to persuade Katherine. Finally, mother resigned and compromised. Katherine’s hope was thwarted. And she went back to school and settled, but only just. (Student Katherine’s Essay)*

Katherine’s creative non-fiction response to Xu Xi’s work describes a student’s struggles webbed with familial tensions. The loaded words (from *Et Tu Mon Pere*), such as ‘disdained’, ‘thwarted’ and ‘resigned’ point to a power struggle that seems

hopeless. However, the essay closes with a relatively open ending and shows Katherine resisting it and making her own choices as an active agent.

Overall speaking, the course Critical Reading Skills, with its use of the works of the English language Chinese writer Xu Xi, and creative writing assessments, has enabled Katherine to express her reality in a personal and creative manner. She participated in adapting the English language to creating discourse that is internally persuasive and meaningful.

### ***Poetry***

During the same course in which they read and respond to creative non-fiction, students read the works of Hong Kong-based Chinese poets who write in English, among whom are Eddie Tay and Yuen Che-hung. During lectures students receive an introduction to the concept of free verse poetry and modern trends in English-language poetry. Students then create their own free verse poems and exercise their agency through creative self-expression.

Chinese poets who have chosen English as their medium of expression are studied because students' ability to respond creatively to such texts is supported by cultural familiarity. In his article on the importance of cultural schemata for second language readers in English, Barnitz cites studies with American ESL students at university level. Carrell (1981, as cited by Barnitz, 1986) found that

Japanese and Chinese subjects ... who read Japanese, French, and Apache Indian folk tales ... were influenced by both language complexity and cultural origin of the text. Both cultural groups recalled a similar number of implicit propositions; yet, subjects made more cultural inferences/elaborations in the recall of the text from their own culture. This study documents the interaction of language and culture in text comprehension. (p. 101)

The poem *Never Forgotten*, by a Hong Kong poet and professor, Eddie Tay, allows students to experience a Chinese writer drawing on his cultural schemata. They can relate to the poem from their personal contexts.

#### ***Never Forgotten***

*Sometimes, at night,  
along a pavement,  
someone will drag  
a garbage bag.*

*Walking past Hondas,  
Volvos and Toyotas  
parked in slots,  
for a father, mother,  
tragic son or daughter,  
handfuls of folded ingots.*

*Here, there, by the road,  
between pavement grills,  
on footpaths by the drain,*



*are three dirty cups, roast meat,  
a plate of fruit, joss sticks.*

*In older neighbourhoods,  
someone will understand  
and chase away a sniffing dog.  
(Tay, 2005, p. 47)*

In a pre-reading activity designed to help students use their schemata, they are asked about road-side shrines in Hong Kong. (This poem is set in Singapore, but the shrines are similar.) They are asked to describe the shrines and consider why they exist. The students are also asked what people leave at the shrines. The vocabulary items ‘offerings’, ‘tragic’, ‘ingots’ and ‘joss sticks’ are explained. Then students are asked to paraphrase and summarize the poem in pairs and share with the class.

After reading such English-language poetry by Chinese writers, in the tenth week, students create a poem about their loves and hates. In the case of one student poet interviewed here, there is evidence in her poem that her cultural schemata were triggered.

### Analysis

The poetry assignment is designed to encourage students to express themselves in a creative and original manner, and in Bakhtin’s sense, ‘to author their other language self’ in their non-native language, English (Hall et al., 2005). Student Yoyo’s comments make a loud statement in her poem.

*Untitled (original syntax remains)*

*What I love about sunflower is its sunrise.  
What I hate about rose is its sharp teeth.*

*What I love about typhoon is its symphony.  
What I hate about ice is its callousness.*

*What I love about Psychology is its mirror.  
What I hate about Mathematics is its labyrinth.*

*What I love about money is its authority.  
What I hate about time is its limitation.*

*What I love about friends is their giggle.  
What I hate about love is its tears.*

*What I love about experience is their vitamins.  
What I hate about memories is their lightning.  
What I love about my life is its puzzle.*

Through the writing of her poem, Yoyo has expressed her own voice and responded to the dynamic environment of Hong Kong. Significant reference to a typhoon and the power of money has shown Yoyo to be a person of Hong Kong. Meaningful personal references include those to the happiness brought by friends and the sadness of loss,

while her point of view on education comes through in references to psychology and mathematics.

Fostering AD students' creative self-expression in English gives them the tools to respond to the world around them authentically in the language. As we have seen in the section on students' creative non-fiction responses to a story in that genre, creative writing empowers them and gives them the tools to adapt to their circumstances, thus enhancing their agency. Returning to Lantolf and Thorne's (2006) definition of agency, we can see from the texts analyzed here that students in the course are able to give meaning to events in their lives and exercise some control over their actions through creative tasks.

## Conclusion

The approach we have described here which uses creative tasks to enhance creativity and agency is particularly relevant to our AD students because of their unique challenges. Their loss of choice when they could not get into university by JUPAS affects their sense of agency.

As Cropley has pointed out, 'probably the dominant characteristic of modern life is that it is subject to unprecedentedly rapid change' (2001, p. 135), and 'creativity helps people cope with the challenges of life and resulting personal stresses and strains and is thus closely connected with mental health' (Cropley, 1990, as cited in Cropley, 2001, p. 136). In other words, the use of creative tasks in a language through literature course can make AD students more effective agents.

When poetry is something foreign to the students, they do not feel connected with it. But when they are given a chance to 'hybridize and populate' their English, they can invest their 'voices, styles, meanings and intentions' in the language (Lin & Luk, 2005, pp. 93–94). This particularly seems to have been the case for Yoyo, the student poet discussed here. From her work, we can see that poetry created an opportunity for her to develop her agency and make English her language.

In this paper, we have discussed our experience of teaching a language through literature course with creative tasks to AD students to show our effective fostering of their agency and their creative self-expression in English, making English their own language.

This paper is based on a small sample of only three students and some of their creative work. We believe that there need to be more empirical studies on Hong Kong tertiary teachers' implicit beliefs about creativity, as we pointed out at the beginning of this paper, because negative perceptions of creativity could put teachers off creative texts and tasks (Chan & Chan, 1999; Runco, 2010). In addition, more research needs to be done to investigate the effectiveness of agency—enhancing tasks for learners' creative self-expression in English, from primary to tertiary levels. Most importantly, we hope that the ideas presented here will be considered by language educators for the new secondary and tertiary curricula so that agency and creativity can be fostered in the language learning process.

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