4 Cento as a creative writing approach to language learning

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Abstract

Creative writing can be both an effective and attractive English learning activity at university departments where students speak English as a Second Language (ESL). Language skill courses might not be always effective enough in improving learners' communicative skills and motivating them to learn, particularly when adopting old style grammar-translation based methods. Involving creative writing as a method to teach language can play a significant role in prompting the students to improve their communicative skills. This study proposes employing a creative writing course as a new method to address L2 learners lacking motivation. It particularly relies on using cento poetry as a teaching activity. A cento is a poem made up of lines the learner selects from different poems by one or more poets. The learner consequently has to read several poems, understand their linguistic structures, and grasp the meaning of their vocabulary to begin writing their own work. It is against this background that this study examines the advantages of using cento poetry in ESL classes aiming to enhance language learning.

Keywords: cento, creative writing, language learning, ESL, L2.

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1.   Introduction

Learners of English as L2 have often pragmatic reasons for learning the language that constitute an essential intrinsic motivation for the process. Undergraduate students who study English as a major or in a foundation course, however, might not have the intrinsic motivation to learn English as an effective communicative language; their concern would mostly rest in matters of passing exams and fulfilling programme requirements. Hadfield and Dörnyei (2013) argue that the concern with passing exams is an extrinsic motivating factor associated with the 'ought-to L2 self' that concentrates on future goals rather than L2 effective acquisition. Departments of English at universities should be aware of this problem, and need to adopt new creative methods that can assist the traditional approaches to teach English in the classroom. Involving creative writing as a method to learn and teach languages in this regard can play a significant role in stimulating students to improve their communicative skills, as it encourages cooperative learning where the students begin to personally contribute to the classroom teaching/learning activities. Cento can then be employed as an effective creative writing tool to assist L2 teaching in this context as it mostly relies on the work of the students. A cento is a poem made up of lines the learner selects from different poems by one or more poets; thus it engages the learner in a language activity that can make L2 acquisition efficient and enticing.

2.   Rationale

Jiménez (2015) points out that students' lack of motivation forms one of the main factors that affect language acquisition of ESL learners, and that "demotivated" students prefer to "abstain from participating" in class activities and require a facilitation of "their participation in order to keep them motivated to learn" (p. 225). The attractiveness of reading and writing poetry can hence play a significant role in motivating L2 students to interact and learn. Koçak (2010) argues that learners' limited opportunities of practice and communication results in creating anxiety that negatively affects the process of learning (p. 141). A cento class can deal with this as it gives the opportunity to everyone in the

classroom to practise and participate since each learner has to create their own written work and then communicate it to others as demonstrated below.

Brown (2007) and Ellis (2008) analyse different factors related to language learning and successful language acquisition. They focus on the classroom environment and its contribution to create effective instruction and engage L2 learners in practising the spoken language they learn. Teaching cento can serve this purpose as it can involve attractive teaching materials like colourful poetry books, poetry posters, poetry including images on the smart-board, online poetry, and recordings of auditory recitations. These materials definitely help in creating an exciting classroom environment and improving language learning.

Part of the problem faced by L2 learners is lexical insufficiency. Rich acquisition of L2 vocabulary is necessary for developing language fluency. Poetry in this respect can function as a prolific source of vocabulary for the language of poetry appeals to the mind where it is easily memorised and from which it is smoothly retrieved (Alsyouf, 2019, p. 65). Munden (2015) similarly argues that poetry engages the teachers and their students "by the fundamental connection between poetry and the memory" (p. 68). Employing poetry in the L2 classroom is therefore a useful language learning tool as it introduces the learner to a rich world of idioms. In a study that examines the benefits of using poetry in language learning, Alsyouf (2019) states that many poems rely on an intensive use of imaginative language that renders the learning process enjoyable. The teacher should therefore select joyful poetry as far as learning idioms and spirit lifting is the purpose of the L2 class.

3.   Discussion

3.1.   Using cento as an L2 learning activity

A cento is a work composed by a random number of verses purposefully selected from a group of poems, and arranged together in an order that creates a new meaningful poem. Applying this activity in L2 learning classes imposes

a sequence of steps that includes reading several works of poetry, selecting particular favourite lines from them, developing a clear understanding of their language, and then beginning to write a new poem out of the selected lines. Implementation of a cento activity in L2 learning classrooms is simple but effective at the same time. Kamata (2019) highlights the advantages of employing cento composition in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, arguing that cento is easy to compose as it helps learners to "come up with original ideas on the spot" (p. 6). It offers an opportunity to examine the selected text and understand its meaning before learners start their own composition. Creating a cento in this context becomes an effortless but efficient approach to L2 learning.

3.2. Application

Cento for L2 learning was applied by the researcher in an ESL classroom. Learners were given selections from Shakespeare's sonnets and assigned to compose a cento ranging from five or six lines out of different ones of them. They were directed to adopt a theme prior to composition, thus the created poem should meet the chosen theme. They were requested also to count the number of the new words/phrases they learned from practising cento creation, and were informed that all types of dictionaries were available to use. They finally had to read aloud the cento they wrote. The results are shown in selected samples below created by learners with previous poetry interests (Table 1, Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4).

Table 1. Learner 1

Verse	Sonnet #	Line #
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,	XXX	6
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:	XXX	4
When lofty trees I see barren of leaves,	XII	5
Nor gates of steel so strong but Time decays.	LXV	8
Now with the drops of this most balmy time,	CVII	9
No longer mourn for me when I am dead.	LXXI	1

Theme: Death closes everything, including nostalgia and all bad feelings of loss.

Table 2.   Learner 2

Verse	Sonnet #	Line #
Now is the time that face should form another;	III	2
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;	XII	2
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,	XXX	3
Then can no horse with my desire keep pace.	LI	9
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.	CXXIX	14

Theme: Facing reality with new ways and thoughts.

Table 3.   Learner 3

Verse	Sonnet #	Line #
When I behold the violet past prime,	XII	3
Calls back the lovely April of her prime;	III	10
Kissing with golden face the meadows green,	XXXIII	3
Even in the eyes of all posterity	LV	11
The hand that writ it, for I love you so,	LXXI	6
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.	LXV	14

Theme: True love eternally lives to be noticed even by coming generations.

Table 4.   Learner 4

Verse	Sonnet #	Line #
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,	CXVI	5
Despite of wrinkles, this thy golden time.	III	12
When I do count the clock that tells the time,	XII	1
All losses are restor'd and sorrows end.	XXX	14
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.	LXV	14

Theme: Love grows up and survives despite sorrows.

Establishing harmony between the predetermined theme and the selected poetry lines created a challenge for the learners because they needed to keep an eye on the meaning each used line contributes to the whole construction. Every word, phrase, and sentence in a selected line was consequently thoroughly investigated

by the learner. The outcome of this practice is invaluable in terms of L2 learning since using cento employs an amalgam of reading comprehension and writing composition activities practised simultaneously by the learner.

After the cento activity, the researcher provided the sample group with a questionnaire that included five points regarding vocabulary, composition, element of enjoyment, dictionary usage, and a free space to mention any other ESL merits of the cento class; students gave the following feedback. First, the activity is useful for vocabulary acquisition as it provides the learners with new idioms ranging between two to six words/phrases for each learner included in the practice. Secondly, it helps learners to get familiar with sentence structures as they have to keep their cento cohesive and coherent and so they begin to think about language as discourse. These two points conform to the British Council's (n.d.) perspective that literature offers "a rich source of linguistic input" and helps learners by "exemplifying grammatical structures and presenting new vocabulary" (n.p.). Students also added that creating a cento renders the learning process interesting and enjoyable, and pointed out that it strengthens the connection between the learner and the dictionary.

4.   Conclusion

Cento is evidently an exciting and useful method of L2 learning as the study demonstrated through discussion and application. The sample group indicated additional merits of the cento activity in the questionnaire. They mentioned that it gave them confidence to write a composition, introduced them to new ways of expressing feelings and thoughts, gave them the opportunity to show creative writing skills, and trained their minds on imagination and creativity. The researcher noticed that those merits contributed to the enhancement of L2 learners' intrinsic motivation. The study recommends the application of cento for L2 learning for the above benefits, and for its value as an untraditional method of instruction and inexhaustible source of language.

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