

Editorial

L2 Creative Writing in Asia: Texts, Contexts and Identity Work

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Ever since Kachru's (1970) landmark studies on Indian English, and with it, his three concentric-circle model of the global spread of English (Kachru, 1986), L2 creative writing has emerged as a unique line of intellectual inquiry. Instead of viewing English learners as negatively influenced by their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, L2 creative writing emphasizes such backgrounds as resources to draw upon to create new literature, or what Kachru termed as "contact literature" (Kachru, 1985). Although much literature and related studies by the end of the 20th century tended to focus on published L2 writers—Conrad, Raja Rao, Amy Tan, Ha Jin, to name just a few—increasingly, L2 creative writing is studied in diverse pedagogical contexts as well.

In the ESL context, a number of case studies in the past three decades have explored multilingual learners' engagement with creative writing tasks such as memoir and literacy autobiographical writing (Canagarajah, 2015, 2020; Cummins et al., 2015). Other frequently used genres were poetry and fiction writing (Hanauer, 2010). All these studies point to the unique educational value of L2 creative writing, in particular, its capacity to engage in the learners' experiences and subjectivities, and by so doing, adding to their identity options an experience-based sense of self as a creative writer. Zhao's (2015) study is representative of this scholarship. Through her detailed description and careful analysis of ESL students' creative writing and think-aloud transcriptions in English, Zhao argued that L2 creative writing identity was shaped by the writers' past experiences and functioned as a symbolic capital to mediate their relationships with the world. Similarly, scholars embracing L2 creative writing in the form of poetry have demonstrated that literacy learning can be humanized. That is, it should not only engage the learners at the cognitive level, but also at the emotional, experiential, and imaginative levels.

The provision of L2 creative writing as a university course in the EFL context is a recent phenomenon. Its inclusion in the tertiary curriculum in Asian countries, whether as a required or elective course, seems to indicate a growing awareness that L2 creative writing can be taught, or at least, nurtured and that the emergent contact literature produced by these courses is important. The world today, so entangled with the English language and so entrenched in the classics, needs a different voice. The English education worldwide, so confined by native-speakerism, monolingualism, and standard-English only dictum, needs a creative deviation. Classroom-based L2 creative writing studies in the EFL context have identified a wide range of benefits such as increasing the learners' engagement, boosting their confidence, and contributing to their language development (Yang, 2020; Yang & Nong, 2019; Yang & Reynolds, 2022).

Our interest in L2 creative writing arises first from our personal experience. Both Barry and I

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have been involved in teaching and researching creative writing in Asia. Whereas Barry comes from a “native” background, I come from a “non-native” background. Nonetheless, both of us have pursued in our teaching a vision that values differences and creativity above writing conventions. It does not mean that we do not teach conventions. It means that we teach such conventions in service of our students’ creativity. We know first-hand the excitement in reading the creative words, imageries, lines, and stories by our students. We continue to believe in the value of such literature to redress the issues of neglecting or negating the marginalized groups such as the indigenous communities (Smith, 1999) as former colonial powers promote it as an international language and aspiring nations embrace it as a language of modernity. At the same time, we struggle with the entanglement between English as a language of coloniality and as a language of imagining new possibility. Thus, we not only teach L2 creative writing, but also research it, reflect on our own teaching experience (Reynolds et al., 2022; Yang, 2019), and whenever possible, engage in L2 creative writing ourselves.

The second reason for this special issue though is a dire need to understand L2 creative writing in the Asian context. As the largest, most populated, and most culturally and linguistically diverse continent, Asia booms with opportunities for L2 creative writing. At the same time, there are major hurdles to cross. The first is the deeply entrenched belief that we Asians should desert our Asian ways of thinking in order to write idiomatically. The second is a heavy emphasis on form in writing education, especially under the pressure of exams. The third is the prevalence of what Freire (2000) calls a banking model of writing education in connection to test preparation. For quick results, it is not uncommon for writing teachers to promote and students to practice rote learning. We believe that if writing teachers welcome contact literature, are mindful in nurturing creative writing in their own classrooms, and appreciate their students’ backgrounds as a resource, L2 creative writing can be a powerful correction to the ills committed by formal/form-all education. Hopefully, by pursuing and promoting L2 creative writing, we learn “how we humanise language, while at the same time showing how language humanises us” (Disney, 2012, p. 15). Therefore, in our call to this special issue, we wrote:

Although there has been a growing body of literature on the needs, possibilities, benefits and challenges in providing creative writing courses to L2 learners in both ESL and EFL contexts, much remains to be done to theorize the roles of creative writing in foreign language literacy education and to trace students’ growth as writers within specific classroom contexts. What forms can creative writing take? Is providing creative writing in the foreign language writing context another way of promoting imperialist ideas? To what extent is students’ creativity nurtured? How? In which ways does creative writing in a foreign language become a channel of “speaking back”? How does creative writing course in a foreign language fit into individual learners’ life and literacy trajectories? How does creative writing contribute to learners’ ongoing identity work? What do teachers do to facilitate their learners’ creativity through writing in a foreign language? Who are the hidden literacy sponsors and brokers in the process of students crafting their creative works? If creative writing can be viewed from an ideological or a negotiated perspective, what is ideological about it? What negotiation is there? What does creative writing do to learners’ voice and agency? How can a translanguaging perspective contribute to studies of creative writing in a foreign language? What do teachers do individually and collectively in their teaching of creative writing in a foreign language? How do such teaching processes shape teachers’ own professional identities as language teachers and writing teachers?

This collection of four articles have responded to some of these important questions. Is one’s ability to construct narratives in a second language linked to perceived ownership of that language? In the first article of this issue, Justin Nicholes explored this relationship through an exploratory study that examined language ownership by analyzing the language second language creative writers from a variety of first language backgrounds produced during a creative writing workshop and then compared this language

to their responses on a language ownership questionnaire. The second language writers that produced writing containing narrative elements showed ownership of English more than the second language writers that produced writing containing simple statements. Clearly, the impact of ownership of English can affect the creativity of the writing produced by L2 writers. Justin Nicholes's study has highlighted the important role that teachers can play in ensuring Asian English writers understand that English does not belong only to white standard-English speaking people. It also accentuates the importance of encouraging learners to explore their life experiences in English (Hanauer, 2010; Iida, 2016; Yang, 2013), whether in poetry or prose.

Can second language writers' confidence be encouraged by engaging in second language creative writing? While teaching an English creative writing class to third-year English majors in Japan, in the second paper of this special issue, Iain Maloney writes about how he aimed to answer this question by requesting students to keep an English freewriting diary, grant interviews about creative writing experiences, and complete a language skills assessment. Students' engagement in second language creative writing resulted in an increase in English writing fluency and self-assessed L2 writing ability. This design-based research found support for Iain's inclinations that engagement in creative writing could be a confidence and motivation building tool for second language writers.

Can engaging in poetry writing develop authorial voice and agency? Jared Michael Kubokawa's action research case study examined Japanese EFL learners' development as L2 writers through the collection of questionnaire, written production, and interview data. The study found a relationship of mutual causation between a learner's agency and a learner's personal belief in the achievement of authorial voice. The takeaway from the study is that L2 writing teachers that choose a pedagogical approach that supports authorial voice would result in learners having a stronger sense of agency.

Can engaging in creative writing develop L2 learners' voices as writers? The fourth paper in this special issue written by Peter John Hassal and Omnia Amin reports on an investigation of how female Emirati students developed their voices, confidence, and independence through the engagement in creative writing. Through a 50-word creative text contest, the authors encouraged the female Emirati L2 writers to engage in creativity. The anonymous nature of the creative writing content encouraged openness in addition to literacy and identity development. The students were encouraged to express themselves and explore their societal position. Teachers should be aware that providing such opportunities to students, especially those in vulnerable positions, is needed to waken students to become conscious of their how creativity is integral to their education and self-development.

Despite this progress, we want to say that what we have accomplished through this special issue is but a call to more sustained research in this exciting field. We are delighted that even as this special issue is being prepared, some colleagues have embarked on a similar journey, resulting in landmark works such as Chamcharatsri and Iida's (2022) edited book *International Perspectives on Creative Writing in Second Language Education*. In China, which has had a few documented L2 creative writing courses since 2010, more work is happening. For instance, Professor Lauri Scheyer, a leading scholar in creative writing, has spearheaded a creative writing program at Hunan Normal University in recent years. Different from other L2 creative writing courses in China, this program has a small but diverse student body; it recruits top undergraduate students from a wide range of disciplines; and it lasts three years. The program is also transnational in its conferences, which involve poets, both seasoned and emergent, from both China and the USA to read, appreciate, and critique each other's poems in English. I (Shizhou Yang) was fortunate to participate in one such reading event hosted by Lauri, share one of my poems, and witness the vigor of (L2) creative writing and the strong bonds created by such writing. We are confident that programs like this will continue to nurture L2 creative writers, whose ways with words will reflect creative cultural and linguistic synergies. We hope that starting with this special issue, *IJTS* will always reserve a space for discussion, debate, and research on the teaching and learning of L2 creative writing.

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to colleagues that served as reviewers of the articles submitted to this special issue.

Bruce Shapiro, Chaoyang University of Technology
 Chian-Wen Kao, Chihlee University of Technology
 Maggie Ma, The Hang Seng University of Hong Kong
 Katrine K. Wong, University of Macau
 Alan Chan, University of Macau
 Riko Ut Meng Lei, University of Macau
 Darío Luis Banegas, University of Warwick
 Wilson Cheong Hin Hong, Macao Institute for Tourism Studies
 Yan Zhao, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University
 Xuan Van Ha, Macquarie University
 Dan Disney, Sogang University
 Fang-yu Liao, Feng Chia University
 Rahmah Fithriani, UIN Sumatera Utara

We would also like to extend our heartfelt thanks to all the authors that contributed to this special issue and dedicated themselves to producing high-quality papers.

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