

## Reflective Learning Article

### リフレクティブ・ラーニング

#### Reflecting on the Use of Music on Creative Writing in an L2 Classroom

#### 音楽を用いたクリエイティブライティングのL2授業の考察



Lee Arnold, Seigakuin University

アーノルド・リー、聖学院大学

[washizora@gmail.com](mailto:washizora@gmail.com)

This song is like a feeling of a young mother going somewhere to abandon her children, she does not have money to feed her children, so she will abandon her children in front of a house that looks like with a rich family inside, with a family richer than her, so probably the children will have a better life. For me this song demonstrate the unstable feelings and thoughts that she had when she go to abandon her children. At the beginning she feel that she is doing the right thing, with her act her children will be more happier in other family maybe her children can achieve something great! But in the way to the place she get regretful, she think about her living with her children, with many problems that her children causes but which makes her happy.

*(From a first-year Japanese university English writing class learner)*

The composition above was submitted for an assignment in one of my first-year English writing classes. The task was for the learners to write short stories to pieces of instrumental music, and I assigned it out of curiosity for what it might yield from them in terms of writing creativity. I was inspired by a conference presentation by Milne (2012) on the use of ambient music in a writing class. In his presentation, he explained how he used such music to stimulate more heartfelt expression in his learners and greater creativity with descriptive vocabulary and compositional exposition. I was motivated by the promise of his findings to investigate what effect a similar approach with music might have with my learners, and what they would produce.

Upon reading this composition, I was immediately struck by the learner's rich, moving response to the piece of music he chose to write about – the French jazz pianist Jacques

Loussier's version version of J.S. Bach's *Siciliano in G Minor* ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Y\\_kRyuoVw8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Y_kRyuoVw8)). It is perhaps all the more moving as the learner's grammatical errors do not detract from his ability to write with great empathy.

Indeed, a number of the learners' stories and texts demonstrated a similar expressiveness and imagination. While some of the compositions were longer, and some were more sophisticated than others in terms of grammar and exposition, I considered this assignment an overall success in terms of learner engagement and task realization.

### Conventional Orientations of L2 Writing Instruction

The noticeable improvement in the learners' level of engagement in this task compared with the tasks they usually did prompted me to ask why creative composition rarely, if ever, appears in much L2 writing pedagogy or textbook assignments. This is not to criticize any particular textbook for my classes. Indeed, I had selected a textbook for this class and found that it was useful and effective for other assignments. Nor can I blame the syllabus; I wrote it myself with the textbook in mind knowing that the learners I would get would mostly be freshmen who would most likely need the structure of a textbook. But the fact that I had to go completely outside of the syllabus to assign a piece of creative writing struck me as odd. I wondered why creative writing was not part of a standard syllabus, and why this had not occurred to me sooner.

Further consideration of this question also brought me to another realization—that learner creative expression also rarely appears as an object of study in most L2 writing research. Kramsch (2006) makes the point that researchers in both TESL and TEFL seem to “have given more attention to the processes of acquisition than to the flesh and blood individuals who are doing the learning, [...] separating learners' minds, bodies, and social behaviors into separate domains of inquiry,” with the effect that “the cognitive and the social have been seen as distinct entities” (p. 99).

This tendency to separate the intellectual and emotional sides of the language learning process also seems to be reflected in the conventional orientation of many second and foreign language curricula. Hanauer (2011) observes that language instructors are more often than not “directed by the imposition of abstract standards, the requirement for particular teaching methods and evaluation tied to external standardized tests” and that in such a mindset, “language learning [...] is defined overwhelmingly in linguistic, structural, and cognitive terms” (p. 1). Student evaluation consequently becomes narrowed to abstract criteria, feeding in turn a research focus that, however unintended, characterizes language learning in abstract terms. Hanauer continues that “the experiences, emotions and symbolic transformations inherent in the process of learning a language are erased and superseded [...] by the overriding emphasis placed on the communicative and cognitive aims of language usage,” wherein “it seems natural to avoid any discussion of the human in the classroom and to emphasize the learning and testing of a decontextualized code” (pp. 1-2).

Smith (2013) raises a further issue with such an orientation. Speaking within the context of learner reading, he makes the point that the bulk of reading material assigned to learners to write about is, more often than not, creative in nature. “Among the most valued texts in any language are creative works,” he notes, adding further that “when we give students extensive reading, we recommend graded readers that are overwhelmingly fiction” (p. 12). Nonetheless, “when EFL teachers ask students to produce written work, they usually ask for well-organized facts and explicit opinions: descriptions, essays, reports” (p. 12). The gap between how learners assimilate

the ideas and language they encounter and what teachers usually seek in written production is stark, all the more when teachers expect learners to engage with the material yet write within a framework that tends to exclude the most interesting aspect of the engagement – the subjective and visceral responses of the learners.

Against such a tendency, an expressive component to L2 writing, where learners are encouraged to write freely and imaginatively in the target language, might be a worthy avenue for exploration in practice and research. On this point, a quote from Widdowson (1993, cited by Hanauer, 2011, p. 5) sums up what dedicated learners aim for and where such a direction might lead: “You are proficient in a language to the extent that you possess it, make it your own, bend it to your will, assert yourself through it rather than simply submit to the dictates of its form” (p. 5).

### Creative Expression in Language Learning

A growing body of literature has nonetheless considered the subjective and creative side of L2 language learning and acquisition (Zamel, 1982; Gould, DiYanni & Smith, 1989; Carter & Long, 1991; Crystal, 1998; Hanauer, 2004; Kramsch, 2009), with the aspect of subjectivity in particular raising incisive questions on the connection between language, learning and identity. On this note, Kramsch (2006) proposed that, while the language learning process may potentially threaten learner identity, it might also become an opportunity for identity re-creation. She characterizes the language learner as occupying a transitional “third place,” an area “filled with memories of other languages, fantasies of other identities” and with “linguistic anxieties and communicative joys, of symbolic gamble and subjective power” (p. 98). Seen from this perspective, the endeavor to master another language is bound up with one’s whole being. “Because it is not only a code but also a meaning-making system, language constructs the historical sedimentation of meanings we call our selves” (p. 99).

This holistic view may be anticipated in Asher’s Total Physical Response (1969); it is central in Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences (1983); and it is even supported by Krashen’s Pleasure Hypothesis (1994). Unifying each of these positions is the sense that learners acquire language when it is meaningful to them, and this occurs not through mastery of discrete clusters of techniques or through an all-encompassing methodology, but when they have the freedom to capture and filter what they find meaningful in their own terms.

Such a view prompts questions on how creative expression may be stimulated, and it is here where music may be relevant as a spur to learner creativity. Perhaps with Asher’s (1969) work in mind, Murphey (1992) explores the affirmative role of music through its somatic and motivational effects, as well as in facilitating vocabulary learning. He notes the pedagogical value of songs given their popularity, their ubiquity in media and public spaces, and in the phenomenon he cites from one of his previous studies as the “stuck-in-my-head” tendency of songs to echo in the mind after listening (Murphey 1990).

Larsen-Freeman’s (2000) book-length treatment of differing teaching methodologies examines Desuggestopedia and the role Lozanov gave to music in his original conception and name of Suggestopedia (1978). In the approach, classical music is used to set various moods as a background to story reading by the teacher and dialog practice and expansion by the learners. A key principle of this methodology is to remove “the psychological barriers learners bring with them to the learning situation” through “techniques to activate the ‘paraconscious’ part of the mind, just below the fully-conscious mind” (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 81). In particular, the teacher

dialog-reading is matched to the music so that “the ‘whole brain’ (both the left and the right hemispheres) of the students becomes activated” (p. 82). This is consistent with Lozanov’s (1978) belief that music was effective in working through the blocks learners unconsciously placed out of fear or lack of confidence.

Even before I had investigated the literature, my own excitement at what my learners were able to produce from my trial of creative writing to music led me to consider how much more their intrinsic interest could be motivated and engaged when a personal space was opened up for their writing. That such research supports my intuitions on the value of stimulating creativity in the classroom leads me now to review some samples of learner writing.

### Using Music to Stimulate Creative Writing

Inspired by Milne’s (2012) successful experience with ambient music, I decided to use instrumental music in four of my English writing classes with mostly first-year learners at two private universities. I chose four pieces of music, ranging from sparse to more layered in aural and instrumental density: the Bach interpretation by Jacques Loussier, a Miles Davis jazz-fusion piece, an acid-jazz performance by Ronny Jordan, and a short Frank Zappa composition that was a blend of jazz, avant-garde classical influences, and rock. My hunch was that different kinds of music might elicit different responses from the learners. My choice of instrumental over vocal music was based on this rationale: to create an atmosphere of discovery and fresh encounter where learners could explore a sense of scene and experiment with characterization without distraction from song lyrics. To bolster such an atmosphere, I deliberately selected music they would not likely have heard before.

I played the four pieces of music on CD and iTunes in the writing classes and asked the learners to free-write a short paragraph to each piece of music in their notebooks. For each paragraph, I asked them to imagine a different scenario to the music and urged them to write whatever came to their minds from what the music suggested to them.

Prior to the classes, I uploaded video files of each piece of music onto the two learner-teacher blogs I kept for each university. In class, via computers or on their mobile devices, I then asked the learners to choose the one musical piece they liked best or thought was the most interesting, and expand on their original paragraph about it. I asked them to submit their work in typed form in the following class.

### Samples of Learner Writing

Overall, the written compositions varied in length and quality, with more proficient learners tending to submit longer texts. Nonetheless, samples of this level of writing demonstrated some surprising depictions with play of contrast within their characterizations, such as this one written to Miles Davis’ “Portia” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0nuNfDYhq6Y>):

In a certain house, thief comes up. The thief gets closer to the room on his tiptoes. When he goes into the room, there is a girl. She is a cute and beautiful girl, and fall asleep. The man falls in love with her at first sight. For a while, she wakes up and surprises him. And he forgets an original purpose and kidnaps her.

This sample effectively conveyed, in its brevity, a scene with an unexpected twist.

With a similar brevity, but depicting a quite different atmosphere, the following sample was written to Frank Zappa's "Little Umbrellas" ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5JBqKYo\\_Xk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5JBqKYo_Xk)):

I imagine many a place with many adrenaline and laughs in the air. Many lights, many people, many feelings, many dramas on the stage and many hopes and dreams delivered for children and teenagers! But also for adults, it breaks the common sense that adults do not have dreams because they lived long time to give up their dreams for "real life." In this place, those type of people can learn that dreams are also real! This place is a circus.

In some cases, quite differing interpretations emerged from the same piece of music, such as these two short samples based on Ronny Jordan's "After Hours" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTymOEuJNlc>):

This has a negative image. The boy was very fat. When he was walking, he stuck in a hole. He was fat so he didn't get out of a hole. He was writhing in pain. Many people assisted him but he did not get out. He reflected on what he had done for the day. He decided that go on a diet.

By contrast, the piece brought out a quite different setting and character for this learner:

I am Jenny. I am 24. I work as a fashion designer. There is a café I go there almost everyday. The café's master is a middle-aged man and he has a cute moustache. The coffee which he made is always tastes good and the music in the café which he selected give me a cozy feeling. I am attracted by him unwitting for a long time but I don't want destroy "the master" and "the denizen" relationship. Because I remember that he said once that he would never be married. So I decided that I would come to this café until it be closed.

One tendency that emerged was that the more dense the musical instrumentation and structure the more impressionistic the writing tended to be. Such density may have hampered imaginative processing and vocabulary choice, and raised an obstacle with learners of lower proficiency, further accounting for the brevity of their work. By contrast, less-textured music, such as the Bach piece, brought forth the most imaginative writing, and offered particular stimulation to more comparatively advanced learners. Here is one submission from a more proficient learner based on the Bach piece ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Y\\_kRyuoVw8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Y_kRyuoVw8)):

The main melody was very beautiful but sad. I felt the sound of piano fantastic, and I also felt something mysterious. It brought me to the world of fantasy, separated from the reality. It made me imagine the story.

In a small town in Austria, there was the calm lake floating some red lotuses. It was in the park far from any buildings, and it was near the forests. The silence controlled the all-time in the park. The place was not warm but little bit cold. The season was early spring. No one was there but a crying young girl sitting on the bench in front of the lake. She looked twelve or thirteen. Her face was pain badly because she lost her favorite clarinet given by her grandmother. She would often play the clarinet in the park and she loved the time passed so slowly.

She knew that she had to go home and tell her grandmother the truth. But she was reluctant to do so then. She did not want to see the sad face of her grandmother and did not have any courage confessing her mistakes. So she wanted to stay in the place any one was not. Only stars knew where she was and what made her cry and stars were shining for her for a long time.

This piece, much like the sample in the introduction, depicts great tension between an idealized state of affairs and a harsh reality, set against an otherwise idyllic background, and characterized with depth and sophistication.

Overall, many of the learners across a range of proficiency were able to create a variety of characters and settings for their compositions to music, commensurate with their level. The experiment with music produced a successful collection of writing that gave the learners a novel way to express themselves in the L2. After the assignments were completed, I gathered and uploaded some of their samples on my blogs to showcase their efforts and for all of them to read and reflect on.

### Reflection and Implications

Creative expression may be the most personal of writing for learners to explore and perhaps this is why it is so engaging and motivating. Yet it still appears to be largely untapped as a pedagogical tool. Holistic language development in general and writing instruction in particular must nonetheless include room for the development of expressive language for the motivational possibilities this facilitates. An index of language proficiency is marked when learners claim ownership of language, and such a capacity in writing is as pragmatically central to the development of well-rounded productive skills as their ability to write clear, logical essays on factual topics. The growing body of research on creativity in language learning and the rewarding experience of writing that I have described imply that teachers could expand opportunities for learners to engage in exercises of creative expression.

This exploration of music for learner creative writing admittedly centered on samples of music that I had selected for the moods, compositional characteristics, and sonic dynamism I knew they possessed. In future, I would like to explore how learners not only respond to other forms of music I have in mind, such as non-Western samples of music, but also music that they choose themselves. Would they respond differently to music with which they were familiar and with which they perhaps associated particular memories? This also raises a much larger question: What role does non-linguistic input play in the language learning process? This question may be answered better within the context of semiotics rather than applied linguistics. The promise this task in the use of music for creative writing demonstrated may call for some exploration of areas where semiotics may be relevant to language learning and acquisition.

While there is still much for me to explore in research, I have sound reasons to believe that any materials and activities which foster creativity in writing classes may inspire more heartfelt learner involvement, unlock learner creative potential, and provide opportunities for learners to widen an emotional linguistic repertoire and thus enhance their L2 development. This kind of development furthers Widdowson's (1993) dictum on learner ownership of language and serves as an exemplary aim for teachers to direct their learners toward.

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## Appendix

Links to music used:

Jacques Loussier - *Siciliano in G Minor* (J.S. Bach): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Y\\_kRyuoVw8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Y_kRyuoVw8)

Miles Davis - "Portia": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0nuNfDYhq6Y>

Ronny Jordan - "After Hours": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTymOEUJNlc>

Frank Zappa - "Little Umbrellas": [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5JBqKY0\\_Xk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5JBqKY0_Xk)