

## **The Creative Nonfiction Genre and Some Connections to ELT Theory**

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### **Introduction**

Motivation is one of the main determinants of success in second or foreign language learning (Dornyei, 1994, p.273) and intrinsic motivation is developed when students are interested in the subject for personal satisfaction. During the two years I was a learning advisor at a university self-access center, I had the chance to see what Japanese university-level English language learners (both majors of English and majors of non-language courses) would choose to read when they were allowed to make a choice amongst many different kinds of graded readers. One of the benefits of working as a language advisor is that the relationship with the students is not as formal as it is with people that students see as a “teacher”. The English level of these learners varied greatly, but nonfiction stories (not newspaper articles) were far more popular than fiction. Graded readers of true events written in a narrative style were consistently read by many students.

This article is situated in the genre approach to language teaching, which “aims to make the language of learning visible and accessible to all students” (Derewianka, 2015, p.6) and it does this in a three-stage process: deconstruction

of the genre (the teacher draws students' attention to relevant features), joint construction (students and teachers collaboratively write a text) and independent construction (students independently write a text) (Derewianka, 2015, pp.6–7). This article began by investigating materials that native speakers use to autonomously learn to write a particular genre, with a view of creating pedagogically appropriate materials for university English language teachers and learners to use to better understand the creative nonfiction genre. The reason for this is simple, students seem to be interested in true stories written in a narrative style and so they may in turn be interested in how to write these stories, or in attempting to write in the genre for themselves. All language teachers are to some extent influenced by their own experiences in language learning, and I was always most interested in creatively using the target language to create stories and skits.

The term “genre” in applied linguistics is somewhat different than the term in communications, and in applied linguistics, according to Hyland, examples of “genre” include narratives, recounts, arguments, and expositions. These are sometimes referred to as “elementary genres”. Genres such as “creative nonfiction” in applied linguistics are sometimes referred to as macro genres (Hyland, 2007, p.153). My intent with this article is to introduce a readership made up of language teachers to the macro genre of creative nonfiction writing. I will try to show parallels between this genre and ELT as well as its relevance to ELT. In order to do this, this article is divided into several parts: Creative Nonfiction Described and Why is it Useful for Language Teaching; Parallels with Creative Writing and Differences with other Nonfiction Writing; Types of Creative Nonfiction and Application to ELT; and Structuring Creative Nonfiction. Creative nonfiction writing has parallels with sociolinguistics, intercultural communication, and discourse analysis in varying forms, as well as study abroad. It can act as a go-between academic essay writing and creative writing in that masters degrees in creative writing have students commonly choose a specialization from poetry, fiction writing and creative nonfiction. Creative nonfiction

could also be used as a springboard to teaching learners communications areas such as journalism, public relations (a part of which is speech writing), and advertising. Doing this would broaden the world of English reading and writing for the student by making English about more than academic essays and required readings. The next section will describe the creative nonfiction genre in general terms.

### **Creative Nonfiction Described and Why is it Useful for Language Teaching**

One way to approach genre in the writing language classroom is to investigate how a particular genre is learned by native speakers. Researching articles, blogs, videos and especially books by working professionals in the field is useful in this, because it allows English Language Teachers to enter the community of practice of writers of the genre. Teachers with a good grasp of how the material is presented to native speakers in the lingua-culture, especially those with backgrounds in both communications writing and TESOL, are in a good position to create pedagogically appropriate materials for their learners, indeed this seems to have been done for some English Language Teaching textbooks, a good example of which may be the *Speaking of Speech* series.

Creative Nonfiction is “Real stories, well told” (the slogan for *Creative Nonfiction*, a magazine for the genre). The equivalent in television may be a biography, or a documentary, but is just as likely to be like reality-styled Discovery Channel programs (such as the character-driven show about reinventing old cars in a hot-rod style, *Fast n’ Loud*). It could also be any movie that is listed as “based on a true story”, although some may balk at that, because ‘based on’ suggests that there are aspects that were made up.

Describing creative nonfiction, Lee Gutkind, a highly influential English professor in creative nonfiction who started the magazine, *Creative Nonfiction*, writes in *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up The Complete Guide to Writing Creative*

*Nonfiction From Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything In Between*, that

The words “creative” and “nonfiction” describe the form. The word “creative” refers to the use of literary craft, the techniques fiction writers, playwrights, and poets employ to present nonfiction- factually accurate prose about real people and events- in a compelling, vivid, dramatic manner. The goal is to make nonfiction stories read like fiction so that your readers are as enthralled by fact as they are by fantasy. But the stories are true. (Gutkind, 2012, p.6)

Others view it slightly differently. University of Texas at El Paso creative writing professor Lex Williford describes creative nonfiction in a series of youtube videos, *Advanced Creative Nonfiction*. For him, creative nonfiction is an “artful blend of what happened and how it felt” (Williford, *Advanced Creative Nonfiction 1*). He goes on to describe creative nonfiction as a blend of *what happened with how it felt; factual truth with emotional and psychological truth and objective (objective, measurable, verifiable, The Social Sciences) with subjective (qualitative, intuitive, empathetic, imaginative, The Arts)* (Williford, *Advanced Creative Nonfiction 1*). He says that creative nonfiction is a blend of factual truth, “real” memory and “invented” memory (quotation marks from a presentation slide in video) and goes on to say that our long-term memory is often filled with exaggeration, but when we remember things they seem just as vivid as if they happened a moment ago. He says that our memories change as we try to make sense of them (Williford, *Advanced Creative Nonfiction 1*). For him, the big question is, “where is the line between creating details to make greater vividness or verisimilitude, inventing, changing or combining characters for dramatic effect and affecting a completely false persona?” (Williford, *Advanced Creative Nonfiction 2*).

For language teachers and learners, creative nonfiction can serve as a bridge between the types of readings students are often exposed to and literature. Students are often exposed to newspaper stories and short magazine articles

as well as readings that were made specifically for the language learner. These last were usually written in the same style as the funnel shaped essay taught in academic writing classes. Students are much less likely to read literature (fictional stories and poems) in classes. Like in creative writing classes for English L1 students, students could learn about narrative arc and how to structure a story. Undergraduate creative writing study helps literature students understand fiction (especially short stories) by making them look at the writer's point of view. Students ask themselves what the writer is trying to accomplish, whether it is successful, and why it is (or is not) successful. This is similar to what English L2 students do in their academic essay writing class. Creative nonfiction classes do the same. Students need to think of events as a story, and they need to concentrate on telling that story to a reader who may not be familiar with the lives of Japanese high school or university students. For many of our language learners, it could be difficult to fabricate stories from scratch. This is possibly part of why English language classes in Japan through to university level rely heavily on a kind of student output which is in response to specific questions and discussing opinions on given topics, usually after some sort of input. That teaching often takes this approach can be held up as a reason against creative writing in language classrooms, but creative nonfiction could be a way to bridge from student output about their own lives to narrative forms of writing.

Language classes often ask students to discuss their experiences and opinions. In an essay titled *The "New" Literature*, in a book of essays on Creative Nonfiction Writing, *Writing Creative Nonfiction Instruction and Insights from the Teachers of the Associated Writing Programs*, Carolyn Forché interviews Ryszard Kapuściński, a Polish "reporter, journalist, traveler, photographer, poet and writer [who was] widely considered for the Nobel Prize in Literature during his lifetime" (Wikipedia article *Ryszard Kapuściński*) who tells Carolyn Forché,

The traditional trick of literature is to obscure the writer, to express the story through a fabricated narrator describing a fabricated reality. But

for me, what I have to say is validated by the fact that I was there, that I witnessed the event.

This type of writing may be easier for our students because they are accustomed to talking about their experiences, and many of them have been repeatedly asked questions such as what they did the day before or during their spring break, golden week, or summer or winter vacation as part of classroom activities. Teaching creative nonfiction requires that students think in terms of scene, and also of characters but of events that are based on real life. The next section concerns similarities between creative writing and creative nonfiction writing.

### **Parallels with Creative Writing and Differences with Other Nonfiction Writing**

One aspect of creative nonfiction that separates it from other nonfiction writing, but parallels other narrative writing, is the scene. Lee Gutkind writes, “The scene is the foundation and the anchoring element of creative nonfiction” (Gutkind, 2012, p.93). Gutkind writes that people have the “propensity to see or interpret all aspects of life as story” (Gutkind, 2012, p.92) and goes on to show three conclusions of research by Dan P. McAdams, professor of psychology. The first of which is that “People remember facts longer and more completely when they are part of a story” (Gutkind, 2012, p.92). Gutkind goes on to say, “[t]his is especially significant for the creative nonfiction writer, whose objective is to communicate information in the most compelling and memorable way possible” (Gutkind, 2012, p.92). McAdams’ second conclusion is “People are persuaded more quickly and effectively when information and ideas are presented in story form. Remember, creative nonfiction is not necessarily balanced and objective; most creative nonfiction writers have an agenda” (Gutkind, 2012, p.92). McAdams’ third conclusion is “When asked to related their life stories, people usually isolate and recreate selected events, like ‘the day I failed chemistry in high school’ or ‘the year of my cancer scare’ or ‘my parents’ struggle over assets

during their divorce,’ and the like” (Gutkind, 2012, p.92). All of this is relevant not just to creative nonfiction, but also to creative writing in the classroom itself. As Williford says in *Advanced Creative Nonfiction 3*, “All good fiction, creative nonfiction, and drama are ultimately explorations of motive- why human beings might do the things that they do” (Williford, *Advanced Creative Nonfiction 3*). This is relevant to English language learners in that the learning of a language also requires the learning of a culture. Especially in overseas study abroad trips, students are often asked to think about why people from the target language culture may do things that the students see. Studying creative nonfiction stories can teach students things about the target culture as well as giving them practice at reading the language itself through realia, while reading a genre designed to be interesting to native speakers in the target language. The next section deals with the two main types of creative nonfiction and how they may be useful to an English language program.

### **Types of Creative Nonfiction and Application to ELT**

Gutkind asserts that there are two basic approaches to creative nonfiction: 1) the memoir or personal essay (the difference between them being the length) and 2) immersion nonfiction (a writer immerses him/herself in the subject area), (Gutkind, 2012, p.xviii). He juxtaposes a memoir and an autobiography by writing that an autobiography is “about your entire life, more or less from the beginning up to the present day”, whereas a memoir is “autobiographical but focuses on one aspect of one period or one incident in your life” (Gutkind, 2012, p.58). He goes on to say that a “‘memoir’ usually refers to a book. A short piece, standing alone, is usually referred to as a personal essay” (Gutkind, 2012, p.59). He writes, “The power of the memoir is in its concentration, the narrowness of its scope, and the intensity and clarity of its revelations” (Gutkind, 2012, p.59). Gutkind points out that there are risks involved with the personal essay or memoir. The fact that it is personal could mean that “people will not

take you seriously, will contend that you are just trying to attract attention to yourself, or that you are lonely and wallowing in self-pity” (Gutkind, 2012, p.59). In opposition to this personal writing is public writing, which is where immersion technique is involved. Gutkind describes this by saying, “the public side of creative nonfiction is mostly somebody else’s story; anybody, potentially, owns it, anybody who wants to go to the time and trouble to write about it” (Gutkind, 2012, p.61).

English language learners could be made to make use of both of these kinds of writing in their studies. The shorter, personal essays could be done within a class or as a unit within a class in which instructors have learners talk about their past experiences. They could be very simple assignments such as, “Describe a memorable event from your club activity in high school. Set up the scene, the characters, and have a beginning, a middle and an end. Imagine your reader to be a university student in America / Canada / The UK who knows nothing about Japan. Try to give that reader information about Japanese school life”. Writing can be scaffolded by learners first writing about what their club activity was, then writing a description of a close friend they had in that club. Following that, they think about a scene in which the two of them did something, or when something happened to them. Finally, they think of some the information that unfamiliar readers would need in order to understand the scene as it would happen in Japan.

The more public type of writing that Gutkind suggests is often done through immersion setting could be set up as part of a study-abroad program. Jane Jackson, a professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, has written two books on study abroad, *Language, Identity and Study Abroad* in 2008, and *Intercultural Journeys From Study to Residence Abroad* in 2010. In both of these works, study abroad program participants write thick description of their lives overseas. An example of this thick description is

Last night, I made pizza with my host mother. This makes me think of mother-daughter relation. Really nice experience... I’m getting along

with my host family I'd say that we both enjoy to talk to each other. I can converse with them naturally. I spent most of my evening with them. We had dinner together, watch TV and talk. I watch my host embroidering and walk the dog with them. It's getting easier to communicate with them and I'm less tense so I can joke with them. (diary, beginning of fourth week) (Jackson, 2008, p.94)

The English level is high. However, if the learner had learned about crafting a narrative rather than reporting occurrences, it is possible that she would have had a different, possibly richer, experience in her homestay. Certainly, more could be done with this type of writing after the sojourn, in-class, or students could use their journals as notes and be taught how to turn them into stories. Professor Jackson describes the narratives of the participants as “cases” (Jackson, 2008, p.69). She describes one of the purposes of her book by stating, “To better illustrate the connections between language, culture, identity and context, and not lose sight of the personal dimension, I decided to focus on the journeys of several participants” (Jackson, 2008, p.69). Case studies are common in qualitative research in language teaching, especially language teaching literature that emphasizes sociocultural theory. Teaching language learners to look at events as scenes, and think of how to describe them puts the onus on these learners to think deeply about occurrences and the people they interact with, rather than putting the onus on a researcher / instructor to translate what happened for the student.

The technique of immersion has many parallels to study abroad literature. Gutkind describes immersion as a process in which

writers can tailor a public story (a larger story) in a way that allows them to own it- to make it their story. A faithful immersion will ultimately yield intimacy and the deeper the writers immerse themselves, the more targeted, all encompassing, and intimate the immersion will become. Immersion takes courage, commitment, and a great deal of time and concentration. Just like the memoir, the idea of immersion is not new-

writers and storytellers have been immersing themselves in the lives of other people and in foreign situations for millennia. It's only relatively recently that people have been paying attention to the methods writers use to enhance their work and engage their readers. (Gutkind, 2012, p.71)

Although the tone is different, there is similarity in content with Jane Jackson's work. In a section she titled, "Living the ethnographic life",

Sojourners...may investigate a cultural scene of their choice in the host environment (e.g. engage in participant observation, audiotape ethnographic conversations/interviews, draw sketches of the scene, take photographs, keep detailed field notes). By developing a "thick, rich description" of the cultural scene and facilitating sustained conversation with "informants" from the host culture, they can become more involved in their new environment, and, simultaneously, enhance their cultural learning and social skills. (Jackson, 2010, p.208)

She goes on to quote Roberts et al. from the 2001 book *Language Learners as Ethnographers*,

Language learners as ethnographers are inevitably engaged with the otherness of their new environment not just as an opportunity to improve linguistic competence and their ability to produce appropriate utterances, but as a whole social being who are developing, defining, and being defined in terms of their interactions with other social beings. As ethnographers and intercultural speakers, they negotiate a particular relationship with those around them, a relationship traditionally described as participant observation, although this fails to capture the complexity of the reflexive effect on the linguist-ethnographer. (Roberts et al. 2001, p.237 in Jackson, 2010, p.208)

Gutkind's, "A faithful immersion will ultimately yield intimacy and the deeper the writers immerse themselves, the more targeted, all encompassing, and intimate the immersion will become" (Gutkind, 2012, p.71) can be looked at as a

way of describing the writers in an immersion setting as becoming more a part of the culture in which they have immersed themselves, which the quotation from Jackson shows with

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and is suggested in the Roberts et al. quotation with “although this fails to capture the complexity of the reflexive effect on the linguist-ethnographer” (Roberts et al. 2001, p.237 in Jackson, 2010, p.208). The following section will detail how creative nonfiction is structured, showing an example from a commercially available story, and an example of how this writer introduces the topic to a language class.

## **Structuring Creative Nonfiction**

Describing how to structure creative nonfiction, Lee Gutkind writes, and also shows in a youtube video titled *The Structure of Creative Nonfiction*, that writers think in terms of two kinds of blocks- *scene* blocks give little stories that “draw readers in and get them involved”, and *information* blocks, in which the writer “can provide any information you want or need to tell them. But you don’t want to provide too much information all at once because you’ll bore them or they’ll lose their thread of the story” (Gutkind, 2012, p.138). Further, writers can imbed information into a scene (Gutkind, 2012, p.139).

There are many examples that can be used to illustrate this technique. In Warren St. John’s *Outcasts United*, a book about refugees to a small town in the southern United States, the soccer team that refugee children play in and the lady who coaches them, the author uses this technique in his writing repeatedly. This book would be described as an immersion approach by Gutkind, and the

writer frequently uses first person, entering the story. In Chapter Eight, “They’re in America Now- Not Africa”, St. John begins with what Gutkind would refer to as a scene block. The first paragraph describes a Nigerian immigrant being pulled over while driving to a local pharmacy. The second paragraph describes the police officer who pulled the Nigerian over as having had a checkered past. This sets tension and draws the reader in. St. John then moves to what Gutkind would refer to as an information block, and this is visually apparent on the page by a centimetre of white space followed by a paragraph that is not indented but the first three words are in all capital letters. For the next five paragraphs, St. John describes the Nigerian’s background- he is not a refugee but an immigrant who has been living in the United States for fifteen years, ending with a quotation that brings the reader back to the present story scene from the Nigerian, ““You can’t have dark skin and a new car in Clarkston without harassment”” (St. John, 2009, p.83). Without repeating the use of the white space on the page and all capital letters, St. John goes back to a scene block, this time beginning with the police officer approaching the Nigerian’s car in the dark (St. John, 2009, p.83). The narrative stance moves into and out of the scene like a zoom lens- using reported speech in the first and last of seven paragraphs of scene to pull the narrator back. In the middle five paragraphs, St. John describes in vivid detail and dialogue the police officer losing his temper and physically attacking the Nigerian (St. John, 2009, pp.83–84). If learners were taught to analyse the structure of pieces of writing in this way, it could become easier for them to engage with this type of writing. A similar type of analysis is often used to help learners understand academic essays.

This type of structuring can be shown to students to introduce the genre to them. In my own writing and presentation classes, I have introduced the creative nonfiction genre by writing the heading, “Creative Writing” and putting “stories (fiction)” and “poetry” under it. On the other side of the board I put the heading, “Nonfiction Writing” and putting “journalism” and “biographies” under it. In

the middle of the board, I have the heading, “Creative Nonfiction” and students discuss what it could possibly mean. After eliciting possible examples and descriptions of what creative nonfiction may be, I show students scene blocks and information blocks on the board, in different colors. Using a list of aspects of Japanese culture, the students spend a few minutes over several classes to write a story about someone they know well that illustrates one of these Japanese cultural traits, which they can share with others in the class. Students write notes about the story on one side of a page, the scene side. On the other side of the page, they write notes describing the trait as if to an audience unfamiliar with Japan, the information side. Scaffolding the writing in this way makes it easier for students to see how to alternate between scene and information blocks when writing their final draft. Teachers can have students put transitions between the blocks in later. To support their learning of this genre, students can read creative nonfiction stories, first with information and scene blocks marked in some way, for example with italics. Following, students can look at a piece of writing and discuss amongst themselves where the scene and information blocks fall. This support is useful because some students seem to have difficulty making the scene blocks (the story) the most important aspect of their creative nonfiction.

## **Conclusion**

Creative nonfiction has elements which seem to have parallels in ELT. This article is not arguing that creative nonfiction writing should be taught instead of traditional academic writing in university language programs in Japan or elsewhere, but that creative nonfiction writing could be taught in addition to traditional academic writing material, because it can be relevant to things many students have done in the past (answering questions about daily events), and could be used to help students to do things they may do in the future (study abroad). Creative nonfiction writing could also act as a springboard to many other kinds of writing. It could serve as a bridge from academic to narrative

writing, and from there it would be a short hop to fictional narrative. Teachers could spring off from creative nonfiction to journalism, public relations and advertising.

As foreign language teachers, we help students learn how to communicate in a different lingua-culture and creative nonfiction has become one of the most popular genres. From my own informal survey of Japanese university student interests in a self-access center, reading nonfictional narratives is also far more popular than reading fictional narratives. Having learners differentiate between scene blocks and information blocks within creative nonfiction pieces could provide them with in-depth analysis of the structure of this kind of writing, which could be looked at as similar to the types of things that language learners do in academic essay writing classes. At the same time, they could be reading material that was designed to draw the reader's interest through its prose style – this could be motivating to many students and that could lead to them reading in English for their own enjoyment.

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