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ITALY

What Mary Shelley Never Wrote: Using Basic Computer Skills to Enhance Students' Creative Writing

ONE OF THE MOST FREQUENT PROBLEMS OF LANGUAGE TEACHERS IS HOW to transform the foreign language used in class from a school subject into a medium for authentic and motivating communication. This transformation means not only using the language for tasks that entail authentic communicative exchanges, but also as a tool for self-expression and creativity. When learners are able to use the foreign language in a creative and original way, they can construct their own meaning through the foreign language and they have become deeply involved in the process of communication and language production. This article reports on a creative writing project based on Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein.* It involved a group of Italian secondary school students using English for authentic communication.

My starting hypotheses for this project were the following:

1. Creative writing activities enhance learner independence and autonomy.
2. Creative writing activities can be a powerful means to foster collaboration among learners.
3. Basic computer skills (word processing and e-mail) contribute to improving the level of autonomy and collaboration in class. These two asynchronous skills allow students the time to think and elaborate their ideas, which enhances confidence and creativity.
4. A sense of audience is established if basic computer skills are used for authentic language exchange and therefore real communication and sharing.

The project began from an analysis of the novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, but a similar project could be organised using a different literary starting point. For this reason this article will not focus on the preparatory work done about the novel itself. The literary work can be analysed in great detail or can be used only as a starting point for the creative writing activities of the students; this choice entirely depends on the teaching and learning context.

Process writing and computer facilities

The use of creative writing activities can be a powerful means to internalise some of the fundamental aspects of the process approach to writing. In secondary school in Italy, lack of instruction time transforms the highly heuristic act of writing in a foreign language into a routine of writing class exercises or test scripts. In these cases, writing is merely the production of text that usually has little authentic communicative value and is only for assessment purposes. Such writing activities are useful and necessary, but if they become the only type of writing that students are exposed to, this macro-skill will be experienced as limited and constrained, not as a way to communicate, express ideas, and construct new and original meanings. If process writing is adopted for some written activities and some of its possible phases are employed, for example, brainstorming, note-taking, drafting, and revising, then the heuristic quality of writing will enable learners to discover what they know and what they can create with language (Hedge 1988; Byrne 1988; White and Arndt 1991; Tribble 1996).

Writing is a complex skill that is learnt rather than acquired both in the first and in the foreign languages. Research done in the 1980s in the field of teaching writing shifted the focus from writing as the production of a final text to writing as a process. Writing is viewed as a process in which the ultimate goal is the discovery of personal meaning that is relevant not only to making sense of learnt and acquired knowledge but also to making sense of one's world and experience (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1987; Scardamalia and Bereiter 1987; Flower and Hayes 1980; Nystrand 1987; Freedman, Pringle and Yalden 1983). Flower and Hayes (1981) and Flower (1985) analyze the complexity of the writing process and its impact at the cognitive level: writing is no longer considered a linear evolution of successive drafts, but a recursive, articulated development that triggers the process of understanding and creates meaning. Flower and Hayes's (1981) model of writing shows the close link between writing and cognitive processes. In a foreign language the situation is even more complex because the difficulties are magnified by the fact that students are learning the foreign language itself (Freedman, Pringle and Yalden 1983; Kroll 1990).

In secondary schools in Italy, students have on average three hours a week of English for the four macro-skills. In this language learning context, a creative writing project using computer facilities (word processing, e-mail, construction of Web pages) can help overcome some of these practical time constraints. Hawisher and Selfe (1998) argue that we are past the stage of questioning whether word processing can improve the quality of students' writing; we now must try to understand the effects it has on the process of writing and the quality of the written product.

The Frankenstein project

The creative writing project was carried out with 23 students who were 18 years old and in their final year of secondary school during the academic year 2000–2001. Their level of English proficiency was intermediate, although some students were at the lower intermediate level in their writing skills.

Before launching the project, the main themes of the novel *Frankenstein* were analyzed and linked to the broader topic of pros and cons of scientific development, a topic which the class had been learning about in their philosophy, science, and history classes since the beginning of the school year. The students watched some sections of the 1931 film *Frankenstein* by James Whale and compared them with the 1994 film *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* by Kenneth Branagh.

The project started when I asked the students to tell me how the book finishes. The question sounded like the obvious one a teacher asks—not to elicit information, but to find out if students studied what they were supposed to study. In fact, the question was meant to start a class discussion, because the ending of Shelley's novel is not as straightforward as it might seem. Summaries given in many literature textbooks used in Italian schools presuppose that the monster will die, but the novelist constructed a subtly complex ending that only suggests the monster's death. This is one possible interpretation. However, this is not explicitly stated and the book offers the opportunity for a sequel to the story.

Aims of the project

The five aims of the project were as follows:

1. Give students the opportunity to feel like young writers (they knew that Mary Shelley was approximately their age when she wrote the first draft of her novel) and to express their creativity using the foreign language.

2. Write a sequel to the story and reinterpret the novel using their own sensitivity, making it more relevant to them. Literature would not be considered an untouchable icon, but rather something that could be transformed through the students' re-elaboration. (See the introductory chapters in Duff and Maley 1990 and Pope 1995.)

3. Use word processing and the process approach to writing tasks to improve the students' skills in editing and revision. Because some of the students had never used a word processor, one of the indirect aims of the project was to improve their basic computer skills.

4. Motivate the students and teacher to be actively involved in interpreting literature. I explained to the students that when the teacher forgets she is correcting homework and starts reading her students' writing with interest, the students' texts become far more engaging than any traditional school assignment and language has fulfilled its primary purpose of serving as a tool for communication.

5. Increase the students' sense of audience by giving them a real and interactive audience consisting of the teacher, their classmates, and students of another class. The use of word processing and e-mail would improve communication, collaboration, and sense of audience among classmates and with the teacher.

The class time devoted to the project was extremely limited in comparison with the total amount of time students spent working on the project. We had only three hours per week for the four skills and final exam preparation, so in class I focused mainly on the organisation of the different stages of the project. Students did most of their work on the project as homework. With homework, student could write at an individual pace and had as much time as they required to think, write, and re-write. Also, they could consult the dictionary and other reference books if they wanted to. The students could use their own computer at home or they could use one of the school computers.

Students as writers, teacher as reader

Pope (1995) offers a wide range of ideas for using a literary text as a starting point for student-generated work. He argues that "the best way to understand how a text works is to change it: to play around with it, to *intervene in it in some way* large or small.... we have the option of making changes at all levels, from the merest nuance of punctuation or intonation to total recasting in terms of genre, time, place, [and] participants.... The emphasis throughout is on exploring possible permutations and realisations of texts in and out of their original contexts" (Pope 1995:1).

After the concept of a sequel was explained to the students, they were given the task of writing a story that would start where the plot of *Frankenstein* stopped. Of course, such a creative

writing task can vary according to the literary work chosen. For their sequel, the students were given a word limit of between 300 and 350 words. The monster would have to be the protagonist of their story.

Students were required to use word processing to prepare their stories and to keep a copy of the computer file. This last item is not as superfluous as it seems. Some students learnt from bitter experience not to keep a hard copy as the only back up version. After writing the first draft of their stories, they handed in a printed copy to me. The decision that the teacher would be the first reader of the stories was made in order to give the students confidence and to allow everybody to go onto the next stage, which was exchanging the stories with their classmates.

The positive influence that word processing had on my students' writing was apparent in several ways after this first stage. First of all, students who had never used the word processor for school work improved their word processing and editing skills, such as spacing, paragraphing, and capitalization. Secondly, all the students prepared tidy and legible texts, which was an obvious advantage for a reader but also gave the writers self-confidence. Comparing these texts to previous, hand-written homework, it was noticeable how attention to the layout and organization of the text increased in almost all students' work. Thirdly, word processing allowed multiple modifications and revisions because error corrections and text restructuring was easier. Major changes in the text become as easy as minor changes. The word processed text became a positive metaphor for language learning because errors were identified and corrected, then they literally disappeared from the page without a trace. Another immediately noticeable advantage of word processing was the limited number of spelling errors, attributable to use of the spelling checker. Because word-processed texts are more legible than hand-written texts (even to the writers!) other errors are easy to identify and correct.

Students as readers

The next stage involved all the students in the role of reader. After their first drafts were revised and improved, the students were asked to print their stories again and give a copy to a classmate so that everybody would have someone else's story to read. Each student had to read the second draft carefully and tell the author whether there were errors, inconsistencies, or problems in the structure of the story. They all realised that feedback had to be given in a respectful and accurate way because everybody would also be at the receiving end. This process of reading and giving feedback went on without much intervention on my part. Occasionally, a student would ask me if he or she had correctly identified an error.

This phase, in particular the accurate and respectful help the students were giving their classmates, supported my first two hypotheses that the creative writing activity would be very motivating and as a result would enhance learner independence and foster collaboration. The students valued their classmates' work because it was the result of personal effort and involvement. Everybody shared the feeling that writing in a foreign language is not easy and therefore should be treated with respect.

My third hypothesis, that basic computer skills can help to improve student autonomy and collaboration, was also confirmed. The process of revision after each feedback session was fast, seemingly effortless; the stories could be read by different people because they were printed clearly and legibly after each stage of revision; the students liked sharing a tidy print-out that looked like a final draft of a real short story; and they willingly revised their stories several times because they didn't have to re-write the text with each revision.

When doing this kind of creative writing project in the future, I would certainly ask the students to use e-mail to send and exchange their stories. This would allow the teacher to give them feedback in a more immediate and non-intrusive way. The students' errors would never be written on paper and any corrections or editorial changes would be easier to make. Because e-mail is asynchronous, it gives the reader time to think about a reply and feedback, and it speeds up the process of exchanging texts. Using e-mail, I could have asked the students to send their work to two or more people, thereby multiplying the amount of reading the students could do and increasing the opportunity for feedback and collaboration. The text would always appear on the screen tidy, ready to print, and easy to revise. Finally, using e-mail would

give the students more practice using computers for communication.

The collection and its name

When the stories had been read and revised at least four times, I asked for all the final drafts and checked them once again. There were very few errors.

The collection of sequels was prepared. Each student suggested possible titles for the collection, and the whole class voted to make a final decision. The selected title was *What Mary Shelley Never Wrote.* One of the students, the cartoonist of the class, was given the task of illustrating the booklet and designing the cover and layout. (See the appendix for samples of the students' writing.)

The students decided that I should write a foreword. The spirit of collaboration that the creative writing had created made the students confident enough to reverse roles and give me homework (with a specific word limit!). I decided that they should approve what I wrote and encouraged them to correct or change my writing, or even tell me I should write it again. When everything was finished, the booklet was printed by the school and distributed to other students and teachers.

An unexpected follow-up

An unexpected opportunity for further collaboration was proposed by my colleague Nella Maccarrone, who suggested that she use the booklet as reading material in her first- and second-year English classes (with 14, 15 and 16 year-old students). The rationale behind her idea was to motivate her students to read stories that older students of the school had written. She wanted to show the younger students what level of written English they could achieve after a few years. She also wanted them to understand that younger age groups that rarely interact with older age groups in school could communicate through the foreign language in a natural and authentic way.

Nella asked her students to choose the story they liked most and write a letter to the author of that story. Her idea was a great success. The authors of the stories received enthusiastic letters from the younger students and eagerly read them, and Nella's students had a precise addressee in mind for their letters, which enhanced their sense of audience. Their letters would not be just another writing exercise, but real communication with students in another class.

This follow-up activity represented a rewarding sequel to our creative writing project, showing us how the process of learning can be enhanced by collaboration and sharing of resourceful ideas among students and teachers alike.

Conclusion

This project demonstrated how creative writing activities can improve student autonomy and collaboration. The motivation offered by the opportunity to write creatively contributed to the useful and respectful feedback given to all students by their peers. The project would not have been possible without the use of word processing to facilitate drafting, revising, and printing legible copies of the stories.

At the end of the school year, the students' evaluations of their English course showed that the *Frankenstein* sequel was among the most appreciated assignments done during the year. The strong involvement the students felt while using the language creatively in an authentic communicative context increased their self-confidence in using English and improved the learning atmosphere of our class.

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APPENDIX | EXAMPLES OF STUDENTS' WRITING

Using Basic Computer Skills to Enhance Students' Creative Writing • *Maria Bortoluzzi*

by *Vanessa Barro*

I had kept wandering for days and days through that land of ice, thinking of my life, of my faults, of my pain, when suddenly I fell into a crevasse. My head hit a rock and I ceased to breathe.

When I opened my eyes again I found myself in a strange place. It was very cold and dark. With difficulty I stood up and I began to look about trying to understand where I was. A man came near me and immediately I recognised him. He was Dr. Frankenstein, the person who gave me life and, at the same time, the person who took it away. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I had hoped I would never see him again, instead he was there. Our lives were destined to join another time. I continued to look at him without saying a word when he explained to me why we were in that place together.

I was dead, and we were waiting for the final judgement. I was worried but also happy; at last I would find, for the first time, peace and tranquillity. All of a sudden we heard a voice that called us and we approached it. The voice ordered Frankenstein to kneel and pronounced its sentence:

"You have dared to go beyond human limits, to create life, and thanks to you a lot of people are dead, but you have recognised your mistakes and you have also prevented another man from committing your same fault. So I forgive you. As for you, Creature, you have no blame, your actions were committed unaware. You were an outcast, but now you will have another chance."

The voice stopped and from that moment everything was different.

by *Michela Basso Valentina*

The monster saw the ship that was going away in the fog while the seamen's eyes, amazed at what they had seen, were looking at him from the deck.

He walked on glaciers and crossed mountains and plains, and finally arrived at a very little village. Here, walking through a wood, he heard a lament; a child was crying alone under a tree. The monster didn't know what he should do because he was conscious that he looked horrible, but the child was really desperate. The monster decided to go near him and to sit down behind him to not scare him. When the monster decided to speak, the child didn't understand who was speaking, and he continued to cry. The monster tried to reassure the child by asking him why he was so sad.

Oscar, the child, told the monster that his parents had just been killed by high-waymen and he remained alone in the world. He didn't have sisters, brothers, or other relatives or friends. Nobody could take care of him. While Oscar was speaking, the monster began to cry; he was alone, too. He said to Oscar that he was very ugly and nobody wanted to speak to him, and people were scared because of his looks. But Oscar wanted to see him: so he turned his head in the direction of the voice.

At first, the child was afraid, but he was conscious that the monster had a heart full of love. They were both alone, so they decided to go away together and to build a common house. They organised their new life with a division of roles: Oscar would go to the village to buy what they needed, and the monster would cut fire-wood and cultivate corn and potatoes. The monster became really happy and his wish was realised: he could give his love to someone that appreciated him. Maybe, in the future, he would tell his "son" his horrible story... or maybe not!

by *Elisa Gomba*

"I want to die," the monster said and while he was disappearing through the fog, he was guided by the icy sea currents towards the unknown. During his solitary journey the monster was tormented by confused thoughts about his horrible condition.

"Why must I escape from my fellows?" he asked himself. " Must I escape only for my appearance? It's not right! Even if I'm a union of corpses, I have a mind. That is the cause of my suffering. I need to love and to be loved but I'm an unnatural fright!" While this suppressed rage and desperation was taking the monster towards destruction, he turned his eyes towards a beautiful landscape of wonderful glaciers illuminated by the sun and infinite plains covered with snow.

Unexpectedly, the peace he found looking at the landscape was broken by a shrill cry of terror! Who was it? The monster turned, and he realised that a child trapped inside an icy lake was waving his arms for help. The monster, driven by altruism, ran to help the child. Fighting against the strong current, the monster was able to take the inanimate child's body, and with a hard effort, managed to reach the shore.

After a deep sleep, he woke with a start and, as in a dream, he was near a woman and the child he had saved. The monster, surprised by their presence, instinctively put his hands on his face to hide his ugliness, but the child immediately took the monster's hands and smiled at him.

"You saved my son," the woman said. "Thank you." The monster realised that he was surrounded by other people and it was, for him, incredible. After some time, he was accepted by this northern population. They were good people and for the first time the monster was not rejected.

"My life must continue, now that I've found what I always was searching for, " the monster thought. "I am not ashamed of myself, and I am accepted as I am! This is my family."