

Finding a Question: Short Introduction

The following article focuses on the theme: *Creative Writing – audiovisual resources as promoters of creativity in writing*. This action research project and its inherent theoretical reflection are based on work carried out in the Secondary School António Sérgio, by the author while a student teacher.

Pedagogically speaking, ‘communication’ has become the main actor inside the foreign language teaching classroom, prioritizing the foreign language’s (FLT) functional character so learners may use it in different contexts and for different purposes. Harmer supports the view that learners have to be constantly exposed to language and must be given opportunities to use it to develop their knowledge and skill (85). Indeed, there has been a major shift in the teaching and learning paradigm, nowadays underlining the importance of oral activities such as role-plays and simulations (Thornbury 96).

Taking this into account, besides the conclusions gathered during the pre-observation phase, it seemed relevant to focus this investigation on the other side of the spectrum: *the writing*. Indeed, writing appears to be the path to reveal the multiple subtleties and complexities of language (Gomes 27). Notwithstanding, writing may be seen as something mechanical, reductive and demotivating even for learners, given that motivation has the purpose of converting teaching and learning into an immeasurably easier, more pleasant and productive experience (Ur 274).

As teachers of a foreign language, we must constantly reflect upon our practice in order to be aware of the fundamental principles that command our work. Thus, I realized that learning a language is not an act of imitation but an act of creativity in its own right, and that learners are creative beings. Indeed, learning a language “is not adding information to information already stored, but constructing new knowledge. In a way every learning process can be seen as a creative process” (Marsh and Hill 13). Education itself has its purpose to stimulate creativity, opening learners to an amalgam of possibilities (Lima 62).

Nowadays, researchers (Knobel and Lankshear, 2003; Larson and Marsh, 2005; Livingstone and Bovill, 1999) are aware that learners encounter a series of experiences and visual activities *outside* the classroom, such as television, DVDs, computers, videogames, etc. (Baratta and Jones 16). Furthermore, Horn (1998) underlies the importance of including the visual language *within* the classroom context given that it will promote more complex schemes of thinking in our learners (qtd. in Baratta and Jones 16). According to Averignou and Ericson (1997), “the way we learn, and subsequently remember, bears a strong relationship to the way our senses operate. This means that we, as educators, cannot afford to ignore the fact that a very high proportion of all sensory learning is visual” (qtd. in Baratta and Jones 16).

In order to move learners away from a mechanical and reductive style of writing, it seemed that the use of certain audiovisual resources (videos and pictures) could function as important vehicles, not only for motivation (being this their primary purpose inside the classroom) but also as valid forms of input. Clearly, learners responded positively to these resources when used as sources of motivation and, therefore, their use for other purposes could bring many other benefits to the foreign language learning process.

Through constant questioning and reflection, I came up with the question that grounded this action research: “*May audiovisual resources promote creativity in writing?*”. Generally speaking, this project intended to test the following premises: a) videos and pictures, as sources of motivation and input, facilitate the concretion of writing activities; b) the use of visual

resources promotes creativity in writing and, lastly; c) the type of activity and material influences the written output.

Furthermore, due to the existing connection between *reading* and *writing*, the written text as a form of input is part of this study and it was used as a way of enabling the comparison between the visual text and the written text.

Defining the Path: The Circle of Input and Output

In order to undertake this task the use of a model that could, to some extent, facilitate and structure the activities done with learners within the classroom was required. It was fundamental to use an *input/output model* that, on one hand, included audiovisual resources as a form of input and, on the other hand, writing activities as a form of output. Therefore, the model structured by Harmer (2001) adapted itself to the needs of this project.

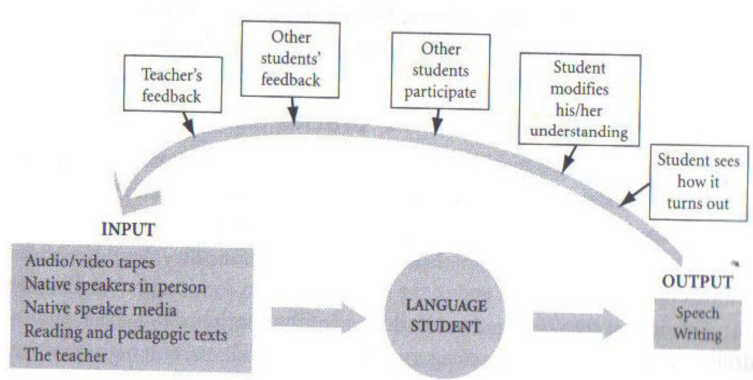


Image 1: The circle of input and output (Harmer 250)

Then, it became necessary to reinterpret this model and, thus, instead of using tapes, one would use videos from *YouTube*, *PowerPoints*, images downloaded from the web, etc. Certainly, it would focus on the feedback process, i.e. in the post-writing stage. Hence, the adaption of this stage was essential.

According to Harmer, when a learner produces a piece of language and sees how it turns out, that information is fed back into the acquisition process and, thus output becomes input (250). So that the feedback could occur *during* the writing process, it was fundamental for the learners to complete the activities not as individual but rather as pairs or group activities, promoting interaction. Brown enumerates some reasons why teachers should develop group activities, such as: a) it generates interaction, as mentioned; b) it promotes autonomy and

responsibility; c) it provides an affective environment and, lastly; d) it promotes personalized instruction (178). Harmer tells us that “writing in groups, whether as part of a long process or as part of a short game-like communicative activity, can be greatly motivating for students, including as it does, not only writing, but research, discussion, peer evaluation, and group pride in a group accomplishment” (260).

Taking into account this framework, all the activities developed would have an *input* stage, through pictures or videos, using these resources to complete a repertoire of writing activities in an *output* stage. In general, these activities wouldn't be product but rather process-centred, in its restricted meaning. Therefore, this *process* wouldn't always follow the hierarchical structure presented by these authors (White and Ardnt 3). In fact, the process would focus on *brainstorming* and on the exchange of ideas between the different work groups and, on their subsequent transference to the written text. It became fundamental to undertake a deeper theoretical research in order to be able to reinterpret fixed and moving images and discover the hidden potential of images: the *quality*, the *creativity*, the *purposefulness* and also the *motivation* and *intention* behind their creation.

Bearing this in mind, I had to decide in which groups to undertake the action research project given that it was the kind of topic that could be developed with all the different groups. I chose to focus my research on a smaller sample, applying my data collection instruments in two distinct groups – 12.º A for English and 12.º F for Spanish. Due to the fact I focus my study on an abstract concept and on one of the most complex human behaviours, known as *creativity*, it was crucial to select two quite distinct groups, in *competence* and in *performance*, in order to keep to some extent the validity of this study. In general terms, Chomsky (1965) separates *competence*, an inner ability, from the language's oral production, that is, *performance*. Moreover, *competence*, being an ideal, is considered to be a mental or psychological function or property (Lyon, 1996) as *performance* happens to be an actual event (qtd. in Brown et al. 11). Indeed, “linguistic competence is the knowledge of particular languages, by virtue of which knowledge those who have it are able to produce and understand utterances in those languages” (Brown et al. 11). It became clear that, at the level of performance and competence,

including Hymes' communicative competence, the English group possessed a higher level than the Spanish group.

In a nutshell, the design and structuring of this project and the definition of the groups' profiles (based on their learning styles and on the multiple intelligences theory) allowed me to harvest the motivational and facilitator power of audiovisual resources to promote learners' creativity in their written output in a foreign language through the use of interesting and creative activities.

Building a Bridge: From the Visual Text to the Written Text

Firstly, *creativity* is considered to be by many authors a rather difficult concept to define given its high degree of inherent complexity, as mentioned, and also it manifests itself in many distinct fields: literature, science, art, etc., in which it constructs its own epistemological *corpus*. Therefore, scholars focus on many different aspects, such as the creative subject, the creative ideas, the creative processes and the creative environment, among others. As Goethe stated "I did not make my songs, my songs made me" (qtd. in Isaksen xvi). Having in mind all its complexities, *creativity* is an expression of the human spirit itself, so it stands as something to be studied, cherished and cultivated (Isaksen 2). Secondly, Freud, the founder of psychological analysis, defined the *creative subject* as someone who tries to give life to his fantasies rather than eliminate them. He provides us with a revealing comparison between a child and a creative writer: both create their own world which they organize and rearrange according to their wishes. So, one can view the creative writer within these lines given that he too creates a fantastic world in which he invests emotionally as he separates it from reality (Gardner 24). Thirdly, through the existence of several other theories, Mayers (1998) designs a theory that defines some interesting and fresh aspects that can easily be intertwined with the classroom context (Johnson 2). Not only does he define creativity as the ability to produce new and valuable ideas but he also establishes five components that, indirectly, affect pedagogical practice (Johnson 2). The five components are: a) *competence*, which means the more learners encounter images and sentences in their learning, more opportunities they have to combine those mental pieces in

new ways; b) *imaginative thinking*, which allows them to see things in different ways, recognise models and establish connections; c) *audacious personality*, which helps them to tolerate ambiguity and risk, overcome obstacles and search for new experiences; d) *intrinsic motivation*, which means they focus on the pleasure and the inner challenge of the assignment and, finally; e) *creative environment*, which provides them with the necessary setting to come up with new and creative ideas.

Within the FLT context, one has to define creativity in a rather restricted way and so one can state that it is nothing but the ability to assimilate and use the acquired linguistic material (Hoz 255). In fact, Goffic and Besse stated learners should be taught how to use language not as separate and individual units but as a combined whole (Hoz 255). But for teachers, learners' creativity goes beyond these limitations as it is seen as their ability to imagine, create, unravel and express their own thoughts and perceptions of the world. Welsch provides us with a definition that can be easily applied to different creative activities, "Creativity is the process of generating unique products. These products, tangible and intangible, must be unique only to the creator, . . ." (qtd. in Isaksen 9).

Despite the subjectivity of this concept, one must define it operationally in order to understand its intervention in this project. So, within the pedagogy of writing, it has to be structured within two dimensions – *form* and *content* –, that are undeniably connected. On one hand, *form*, given that the more learners explore and know a language, the more they will be able to use it. On the other, *content*, given that it translates itself in the construction of reality and imaginary worlds, in problem solving and, consequently, in the creation of an innovative product (the written text) for its creator (the learner/writer).

According to Lennerberg, "human beings universally learn to walk and to talk, but that swimming and writing are culturally specific, learned behaviours. . . . We learn to write . . . usually only if someone teaches us" (qtd. in Brown 334). Bearing in mind that writing is a creative process, *creative writing* promotes the variation of the same topic as the learners produce their texts, exploring all the linguistic restraints associated to the act of writing (Leitão 31). As teachers, we must guide our learners and understand the shift in the writing paradigm,

and see it not as a *product* but as a *process*, and see learners as creators of language, allowing them to focus on content, message and their own individual intrinsic motives (Brown 335). After all, creative writing is “a journey of self-discovery, and self-discovery promotes effective learning” (Gaffield-Vile qtd. in Harmer 258). As *images* appear to be a way of reinterpreting reality, so does the *written text* given that language is a powerful tool to rearrange our experience in the world and not a mere way of describing the world through language (Leitão 33). Indeed, the evocation of *images*, mental images, allows learners to think of non-existing or absent things and convert them into linguistic expression. Whether we consider *fixed* or *moving images*, we teachers must be aware that there are multiple possibilities of interpretation of what we see, acting as a kaleidoscope of reality itself. “We predict, deduce and infer, not only from what we hear and read but from what we see around us and from what we remember having seen” (Wright 2).

Therefore, we must make use of an extensive amount of different *visual aids* within the classroom context and not simply consider them as something extra or a thrill, but as central to the learning process. Indeed, they can be used “to explain language meaning and construction, engage students in a topic, or as the basis of a whole activity” (Harmer 314). In this particular case, they act as a prelude for creative writing activities. Following the perspective of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2000), *images*, or the *visual text*, communicate with the spectator as the *written text* communicates with the reader, in a sort of symbiotic relation (Costa and Costa 195).

Though teachers are forced to develop logic, analysis and memory, learners have constant access to intuition, imagination and emotion through these audiovisual resources, such as pictures and videos. Indeed, the figure of the teacher is no longer the primary or unique source of knowledge. Hence, videos – music videos, sketches, etc. – have become a relevant source of knowledge in the classroom given that they offer infinite possibilities in their use and not a simple “listening with pictures” (Harmer 282).

In a nutshell, these *fixed or moving images* function as a visual stimulus that evoke sensations and reactions and, consequently, stimulate the learners’ curiosity, imagination and

expressive ability, whether in speaking or *writing*. In the words of Sartre, “Is the image not a synthesis of affectivity and knowledge?” (72).

Into Action: English Classes

On the assumption that the human mind is flexible and adaptable, the brain is also capable of growing through practice (Marsh and Hill 8). The brain functions like a computer as each hemisphere processes the information in a different way. On one hand, the left hemisphere “thinks” in numbers and words, being responsible for skills such as mathematics, reading and writing. On the other hand, the right hemisphere “thinks” through images and feelings, being responsible for new and numerous creative ideas. Thus, learners must have access to different types of tasks that stimulate both sides of the brain such as working with music, poetry, images, writing and so on.

In the first English class of the first cycle of the research project, learners focused on the topic of *Human Rights*. This class in particular had a typical pedagogical framework – *pre*, *while* and *post-viewing* –, the main focus being a high impact video related to the topic at hand: *The S word – Ten facts about slavery*. All the activities before the production stage worked as preparation for the final writing activity, culminating with a group activity in which students had to come up with suggestions to resolve this problem. The activity itself followed the process-focused structure: *brainstorming*, *drafting*, *evaluating* and *reviewing*. In this activity, my observation focused more on the brainstorming and evaluation by peers. The evaluation didn’t focus on the linguistic errors but rather on the content, as Harmer states: “when we give feedback on more creative or communicative writing, . . . we will approach the task with circumspection and clearly demonstrate our interest in the content of the students’ work” (109). Through the observation of their writing, I came to the conclusion that it was quite challenging and learners included their own personal views and experiences in their output. Objectively speaking, through the analysis of certain criteria to evaluate the learners’ writing creativity in both form and content, I concluded that not only their language but their knowledge schemata were activated during this activity. Furthermore, the video worked as a positive stimulus for their

creativity, due to its appealing and emotional connotations. Due to the one-on-one work developed with each work group, they were able to select and use correctly different lexical items and structures appropriate to the situation but external to that particular lesson.

On the second class of this cycle, the main theme was *The 1950's and Cinema*, which prompted the use of videos, in this case, scenes from Alfred Hitchcock's movies such as *Dial M for murder*, *Birds* and a satirical video of the latter. The final activity was divided into two distinct sections: firstly, they had to re-write a scene of *Birds* according to a different genre (humour, drama, etc.) as if they were the director of the movie and, secondly, they had to envision a satirical video for that particular viewed scene. I could observe that learners opted to include a comical element in their writing, creating amusing storylines. In the *feedback* stage, learners had to comment on each other's work and vote for their favourite. Regarding the *brainstorming* stage, it was quite productive given that each element presented ideas and suggestions and the final product showed an autonomous reevaluation of their work. The visual text used proved to be motivating as I could observe from students' reactions and comments. Thus, learners interpreted the input provided by both scenes and came up with two distinct texts. Taking into account that they had to assume a different character, this appealed more to their creative thinking. Overall, their writing followed the established criteria of form and content given that they adapted the genre of the scene, using different techniques of writing, vocabulary and structures.

On the first class of the second cycle of the research project, which introduced new variables (the use of the fixed images and the written text), the main theme was *The 1950's and Literature*, using an excerpt of Jack Kerouac's *On the road* as a guide for the lesson given that it was lexically rich. In the final activity, learners looked at an image of an open road and where asked some questions about possible destinations, where they would go in the Cadillac, etc. Then, they had to look again at the final sentence of the text "*Where are we going, man? I don't know but we gotta go.*" and continue the story of this journey. There was an interactive dimension to this activity given that each group had a time limit and they had to complete the other groups' stories, leading to many variations within the same story. Through the observation

of their recurring work, I realized that they were capable of coming up with imaginative ideas but they weren't able to use and maintain the nuances of the language such as the slang and colloquial expressions. Indeed, there was a clear shift in their writing, mainly in the content of the text. They came up with interesting ideas for destinations, feelings and situations but their final product didn't completely reflect the ideas brainstormed as a group, leaving out some of the most interesting or creative ones. Generally speaking, the output was creative but certain external variables could have affected the results: the changing of the groups' dynamic and the establishment of a time limit.

In a nutshell, the use of the moving images led to creative writing, maximizing the learning process and working as a cognitive stimulus and, thus, activating their language knowledge.

Into Action: Spanish Classes

Regarding the Spanish classes, they presented a bigger challenge and, thus, the writing activities followed grammatical consolidation activities and required good models of language. After this process the learners could be challenged to engage on more creative activities.

In the first class of the first cycle, around the theme of *Mundo del Trabajo*, I chose to use an authentic video *Cómo buscar trabajo*. Firstly, this class followed a typical pedagogical framework – *pre, while and post-viewing* –, culminating with a final writing activity in groups, in which learners had to write a short script to add to the video. As they worked in groups, they needed help to come with topics and ideas for their scripts due to the lack of language knowledge. Notwithstanding, the group was capable of brainstorming interesting suggestions and composing a coherent and creative text, though they didn't truly believe in their own expressive abilities as they hesitated to share their ideas, at first. Overall, they proved to be able to interpret the visual input and come up with a different product from the original. Related to the structure, they showed difficulties in using appropriate lexical items and grammatical structures but, with some teacher guidance, they completed the activity successfully. After all,

as teachers, we must act as *resources* and *prompters* for our learners in order to provide them with a safe environment for their knowledge to prosper.

When it comes to the class led in the second cycle, I chose to use as a model of language a modern version of *La Cenicienta* (Cinderella) given that the group was working with children. The art of storytelling is quite appreciated by children and extremely important for their social growth. Moreover, they too create fantastic worlds, considered by the rest to be simple imagination, but, by them, reality. Bearing in mind the lack of knowledge of the group at hand, the process required a good consolidation of the learned structures that could prepare them for the creative writing activity. In general, the written text was used as a model of language for the final activity given that it provided learners with the necessary language (lexical and grammatical structures) required to compose a coherent and creative tale. Furthermore, the image provided, a fat Cinderella, provided learners with a visual input and a different kind of model for their work. Indeed, it motivated them to write a variation of the original that didn't follow the standard vision of the tale and, thus, much more current and applicable to our reality. It also functioned as a prompt for the discussion of women's role in society and how we are perceived. Each group had access to an envelope with different words to use in their tales, functioning as a guide for their writing. As I observed their ongoing work, they seemed quite motivated for the activity and, surprisingly, I noticed clear improvements in their writing skills. Structurally, they still made some mistakes but they were capable of constructing a coherent and cohesive text and, content wise, they were capable of interpreting the input and creating their own product: a fairytale.

Finally, according to Byrne, *visual aids* should be defined in a wider way as "anything which can be seen while the language is being spoken may be visual aid" (194). Thus, it is remarkable to observe the impact and effects of videos, images, texts, and so on, over the human mind and how they influence the way learners interact and write. Overall, both groups were capable of being creative writers but, each visual input had a distinct impact on their work. Indeed, each group was capable of reinterpreting reality itself and producing something else, a

different outcome of something pre-existing and, thus, language took a different form, not simply a reflection of knowledge but rather of their own mind and expression.

Conclusion

Taking into account current trends in teaching methodologies, this study focused on *writing* rather than on speaking. The written text has an interactional dimension too, just as the visual text, given that when the learner/writer writes, it does so for an audience/reader. Therefore, as readers, we visualize the writer as if he was speaking to us and, as writers, we visualize the reader as if we were speaking to him (Thames 201). In spite of the limitations of this action research project, I can state that audiovisual resources can facilitate the completion of writing activities of a creative nature. In the end, it turned out to be a powerful motivator but also an important vehicle of input given that it presented its own interpretation of reality, allowing learners to come up with a creative output. Indeed, these learners were capable of interpreting the information and message conveyed by the fixed or moving images, reinterpreting them according to their own views of the world. Thus, writing became a pure reflexion of the learner himself.

Within the pedagogy of image, a clear understanding of the ways of thought and, also, the learning styles of the subjects allowed me to understand the *schema* that they visualise and create in order to clarify how they complete the activities and even learn (Baratta and Jones 16). According to Kantor, there were some flaws in the studies related to writing, namely “the conditions under which students write; the methods and styles of teachers; the personalities, attitudes, and learning processes of students and the many interactions among these variables (qtd. in Zamel 701). Therefore, this project tried, in a superficial manner, to capitalize the understanding of the learning styles/information processing to select meaningful and creative writing activities.

Notwithstanding, it is impossible to generalize these hypothetical premises to the general FLT context in Portugal. An interesting aspect was the sample’s confrontation with different genres of visual texts, all marked by their authenticity, which, consequently, led to different

reactions such as surprise, indifference, laughter and disappointment, among others. It underlined the possibility of including learners' own reality as a path to achieve a more meaningful learning of a foreign language.

Regarding the pedagogy of writing, Zamel pointed out some false assumptions taken as granted in the teaching context, such as "faulty assumptions that there was a best method and one just had to find it, that teaching writing was a matter of prescribing a logically ordered set of written tasks and exercises, and that good writing conformed to a predetermined and ideal model" (697). Thus, all the activities took into consideration the group, adapting the materials to the learners' level in order for all of them to be able to produce creative texts.

However, there were certain limitations to this study – the sharing of the group, the interference of external variables, and the reduced number of classes – that could have affected the validity of the results. According to Wallace, "it would be extremely naïve, of course, to imply that all our professional problems are capable of solution. Some can be investigated; some we might have to walk away from; others we might have to live with" (14). Therefore, one must never stop pursuing the improvement of our own action as language teachers.

By way of conclusion, there is a wide range of further research paths that could be taken up, such as: using images (fixed and moving) to develop learners' oral skills and, also, lexical and cultural sub-skills; confronting learners' with different genres of audiovisual texts and studying the advantages/disadvantages in their use; using videos produced by learners and noticing the benefits in that task; further researching of the symbiotic relation between reading and writing; and, lastly, studying writing as a process divided into different stages .

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