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MEDIATING MULTILINGUALISM IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

Nurturing Divergent and Creative Thinking through Micro Writing: Insights from a Tertiary EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Regardless of its potential to foster divergent and creative thinking, micro writing (MW) has not been a major theme of studies, making it lack empirical evidence on its feasibility and effectiveness. This study aims to portray how MW was implemented in a mixed-ability EFL classroom and how the students responded to MW activities. In this study, MW was realized in form of 2 main activities: word-limited compositions and framed responses. The participants were 25 first-year students of an English Education Department. While the study was carried out with the whole class, three focal respondents were observed closely to see how the MW was met by three different categories of students: the struggling, the average, and the strong students. In addition to observations, an open-ended questionnaire was used to enrich data on students' perceptions and responses to the MW. The collected data were analyzed using an interactive model and emerging themes are discussed. The findings of this study provide a hands-on guide for teachers to conduct MW in their respective contexts while mitigating the challenges that might occur in the process.

Keywords: creative thinking; divergent thinking; EFL; micro writing

1. Introduction

Moving forward from convergent thinking which characterized most EFL classrooms in the previous decades, teachers and students these days are encouraged to have multiple perspectives, and propose different and fresh ideas of ways of doing. The shift from the habit of thinking convergently to divergently and creatively, however, is often challenged by the fact that students in EFL classes commonly have different levels of thinking ability. Insofar, attempts to foster divergent and creative thinking in mixed-ability classes have yet to gain satisfying results as seen by the persisting disparity between strong and weak students.

On such grounding, it is important to ensure that in the attempt of promoting divergent and creative thinking, all students have the same opportunity to practice regardless of their level. At this point, micro writing (MW) is seen to have some promising solutions. Micro writing in this study is

broadly defined as an activity of producing a short piece of writing, often limited to several words only, with the main focus on its efficiency and linguistic accuracy. The activities come in various forms but mainly they are limited by the number of words or sentences. This limitation allows students to pay attention more to conciseness, keep the writing focused, and mind linguistic accuracy. While the number of micro-writing activities is quite many and keeps growing as teachers continue to creatively come up with teaching ideas, two forms of activities that will be used in this study are presented briefly in this section. They are adapted and synthesized from Christopher (2018), Ferlazzo (2018), Lyke (2018), Malanek (2015), and Quigly, (2015)

a. Word-limited writing

As the name suggests, this is an activity that requires students to write within word number constraints and within a limited period. This is the basis of nearly all variety of micro writing activities. In the practice, word-limited writing may include tasks such as producing a 6-word composition telling about their first days as a university student, writing a 10-word movie review, writing a one-sentence summary of the lesson, or writing a two-sentence self-description. The variations are limitless. A little tweak of the activity includes using a 3-2-1 pattern, the student's phone number, birth date, postal code, shoe size, or even the student's favorite number as the limit for their writing.

b. Framed-responses

A framework is often used to guide students do micro-writing activities. A framework can be in the form of question stems, sentence starters, and patterns to be used in responding to a certain prompt. When using question stems, a teacher may ask students to, for example, read a story (or watch a movie) and then ask them to create "What if..." questions based on the story. Sentence starter examples include "I like my mum when" or "I feel most relaxed when". Meanwhile, two pattern frameworks that are often used are 1-2-3 (or the backward 3-2-1) and the A-B-C framework. The 1-2-3 framework does not only provide the pattern for a response but also limits the response. The A-B-C framework is often used to guide students to give elaborate answers to questions. ABC stands for stating the Answer, Back up with evidence/argument, and giving interpretive Comments/ building Connection (to prior experience or knowledge).

Micro-writing activities are not exclusive to writing classes. As mentioned earlier, students have done frequent micro writing in their daily life. Social media posts (such as Tweets and Insta-stories) and social media comments are among the most frequently produced micro-writing. In their academic life, students majoring in English have commonly produced a lot of micro writing when they answered questions in tests of any courses they take.

Micro writing has been used in EFL classrooms to address the students' anxiety in producing a piece of writing. For most EFL learners, writing is considered challenging due to the complexity of thinking that is involved in the process. To produce writing, students have to think about the ideas, the vocabularies, the structures, the mechanics, and the organization simultaneously. The anxiety usually

gets intensified when the students are thinking about the number of words or length of the writing. In micro writing, the writing assignment is not focused on quantity but on conciseness and accuracy. Ideas are stimulated through various tasks and questions that are crafted to allow multiple responses or answers. Thus, allowing everyone in the class to feel that they have the same opportunity to express themselves in the writing tasks, i.e. everyone has the feeling that “I can do this” or “I have a say about it”.

Christopher (2018) shared that low-stakes, shareable writing assignments in micro writing work well to help students produce strong sentences and support identity development. He added that micro-writing “helps all levels of writers build a sense of belonging and help teachers and students create strong classroom communities”. Micro writing is also helpful for students to engage in higher-order thinking. Since quantity is not the focus, students have more opportunities to pay attention to the quality of their responses to the prompts. Lyke (2018) admitted that she liked using micro writing because it can push students to a higher level of Bloom’s taxonomy without taking a lot of class time. She testified that her students generated something new with their knowledge and students often perform evaluation as they create an argument or make a value judgment/ comment. In addition, using the right prompts, micro-writing allows different levels of students to express their creativity. For example, Ferlazzo (2018) used prompts such as replacing titles and plot twists so that students can come up with different and fresh ideas to share.

Indices of HOTS that the students performed can be traced from their ability to think divergently and creatively. Divergent thinking can be broadly defined as the ability to come up with multiple answers or ideas, as opposed to a single correct answer which is commonly the result of convergent thinking. Reinartz (2013) wrote that to be creative, a person has to be able to think divergently. Novel or creative answers/solutions are derived from the ability to generate multiple answers. Meanwhile, in Webster’s New World Dictionary, the word “creative” has three interrelated meanings: 1) creating or being able to create, 2) having or showing imagination and artistic or intellectual inventiveness (creative writing), and 3) stimulating the imagination and inventive powers. Other numerous attempts to define creativity and creative thinking commonly include the key point of the ability to look at different angles, creating something new, coming a different/ new solution/ way out. The word ‘novelty’ is often the keyword in defining creativity. Meanwhile, Paul and Elder (2018) viewed creative thinking as inseparable from critical thinking, and both are achievements of thought. They asserted that “creativity without criticality is a mere novelty. Criticality without creativity is bare negativity”. Paul and Elder argued that “novelty alone will not do, for worthless novelty is easy to produce”.

The creativity issue is that not only there is no firm consensus on its definition but also there has been a debate on what’s the best method to measure such an abstract concept. One of the most frequently mentioned means to measure creativity is using the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (TTCT) which was developed by Torrance based on the work of Guilford. The test formerly includes

four scales: fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration. Another way to measure creativity is by using a creative achievement questionnaire. It is a way to measure a person's creativity based on their achievement (such as arts, music, and creative writing). Meanwhile, Lucas (2016) proposed five dimensions of a creative person that include inquisitive, imaginative, persistent, collaborative, and disciplined. He argued that the five are potentially used to measure students' creativity.

Considering the persisting debate in the field and the narrow scope and focus of the present study, this classroom research will not put a large emphasis on the measurements of divergency and creativity. Rather, this classroom study focuses on gaining an understanding of how teaching using micro writing may or may not be used to train students to think divergently and creatively. Qualitative evaluation of success or drawbacks will be based on how the students responded to the tasks and on the assessment of their writings in general, not particular, on four aspects: fluency, inquisitiveness, originality, and imagination. As observed, these aspects are adapted from Torrance (1980) and Lucas (2016). A checklist is developed as one of the means to analyze students' works.

Regardless of its potential to foster divergent and critical thinking, micro writing has not been a major theme of studies. Micro writing is more commonly found on teacher resources website which suggests teachers some general doable methods of teaching and in teacher's blogs in which they share their experiences in implementing micro writing. The limited number of studies makes MW lack empirical evidence on its feasibility and effectiveness. This study bridges the gap by providing a portrayal of the implementation of MW in an EFL classroom and how the students responded to it. Taking the design of a classroom study, this research involved first-year university students. Two MW activities implemented in the study include word-limited sentences and the use of frameworks. The foci of this present study are: (1) how micro writing activities are conducted in an EFL class and the challenges in the implementation, and (2) whether divergent and creative thinking are promoted.

2. Method

2.1. Design

This study took the design of classroom research. Under this design, we did a formal or systematic investigation in the classroom setting to better understand how micro writing can be implemented to train students' divergent and creative thinking. This study does not necessarily aim to improve teaching practice as in a classroom action research. Instead, as an exploratory study, this investigation aims at gaining a better understanding of teaching practice, i.e. using micro writing. It seeks to explore how the micro writing activities are conducted; the procedure, and how mixed ability students respond to them. Ultimately, this study aims at drawing a better understanding of micro writing through a critical

evaluation of its implementation; whether micro writing promotes divergent and creative thinking, and what are the gains and losses.

2.2. Participants

In line with the design, the unit of analysis of this study is a class. This study involved 25 first-year university students majoring in English Education. The students were having different levels of English proficiency as indicated by their English Score results. Having the same age, the general profile respondent form that they filled in indicated that the students shared different interests in different topics. Three out of the twenty participants were selected as focal respondents: Michael (Male, Intermediate), Hana (Female, Advanced), and Juna (Male, Beginner) each representing a category of students. The focal respondents were also chosen based on the consideration of whether they can articulate their ideas well during data collection.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

Data for this study were collected from three main sources: events, participants, and artifacts. To collect data from events, participatory observation was carried out for four sessions, approximately 100 minutes per session. Field notes were utilized to record incidents. To collect data from the participants, an open-ended questionnaire was distributed. Meanwhile, data from students' work (teaching and learning artifacts) were collected for analysis. The students' writings were evaluated and indices of divergent thinking and creative thinking were noted based on a creativity rubric. The analysis of the students' writing will look at whether the student's writing as a whole indicates the dimension of fluency, originality, inquisitiveness, and imagination. All data will then be analyzed to find themes of finding. The steps for analysis will follow Yin's (2016): compiling, disassembling (sorting all the data obtained), reassembling (i.e. coding), interpreting, and concluding

3. Finding dan Discussion

3.1 Implementation of Micro Writing Activities: The Practice and the Challenges

3.1.1 The Practice of Micro Writing

Two types of MW activities were implemented in this study. They are word-limited writing and framed writing. Each type was conducted in the following procedure.

Word-limited writing

Two word-limited activities were conducted in this study. The first was "A glimpse of me" which was carried out in the initial phase of the first session of the course. In this activity, the students write a brief introduction and self-description in a Padlet. Since the students were freshmen and did not each other, the activity came out as a natural class member introduction at the opening stage of the session. Each student was asked to describe themselves in exactly 22 words.

The second word-limited activity was aided by a vignette. It was carried out in the second session. The students were asked to respond in a maximum of 25 words to this situation: “Student A failed in a course. She attended all sessions, did all tests, and submitted the assignments. Why do you think A failed?” To contextualize this activity, the lecturer put the vignette as a ‘possible situation’ that the students might face in the future. The lecturer convinced the students that identifying the factors or elements of success (and failure) will be beneficial for the students as freshmen

Using framework

A 3-2-1 framework was used as an exit ticket for the third reading class session which focused on the stated main idea. In this activity, the students posted in a Padlet three adjectives that describe their current feeling, two things that they want to do/ have in the next lesson, and one thing that they learned the best that day. The activity was carried out the last 10 minutes before the third session ended.

The second framework was ABC and it was carried out at the opening phase, ‘gaining attention stage’, of the fourth session. The students were asked to choose one of two movies that they would suggest to their parents based on two movie trailers that are presented to them. After the students were shown the clips, they were briefly explained about the ABC framework and when it’s commonly used. Then, the students were given 15 minutes to write their answers.

3.1.2. The Challenges in the Implementation of Micro-Writing:

At first, this present investigation was planned to be a stand-alone MW conducted in a basic writing course focusing on sentence building and simple paragraph development. But due to some changes in the schedule, the activities of MW were eventually conducted as *embedded* activities in a Reading course. In principle, MW is not exclusive to writing courses thus, theoretically, it is possible to have MW in other courses. However, this study found some challenges in incorporating MW into a course as *embedded* activities.

Time constraint

Data from the field notes revealed that MW implementation took longer time than expected. Writing a response in a limited number of words was considered as- in our terms- a ‘positive challenge’ for the students. In the ‘A glimpse of me’ activity in which students were asked to introduce/ describe themselves in 22 words, Michael noted that “It’s harder than I thought. I thought writing a long paragraph is hard but turns out that it’s harder to write a shorter response”. Michael said that he had a lot of things to say but the word limitation makes him think hard which ideas to put and how to deliver much in the most efficient way.

The case of Michael, who belongs to the ‘medium’ category (based on his ES score) experienced what we label as the ‘positively challenged’. He does not indicate having a negative attitude or feelings toward the limited number of words. He has the ‘what’ to write and he knows the necessary structure

and vocabulary knowledge for his ideas. The limitation was not in one way or another ‘frustrating’. Instead, he admitted that is driven to solve the challenge. This kind of experience makes Michel and other students keep thinking and trying to respond to the MW task regardless of the time limit. To put in an analogy, Hana (high ES score) described the thinking process as similar to playing ‘Candy Crush’ in which she tried to crush as many candies as possible in one move. To do so, she had to look at different possible moves and the consequences of the moves before deciding which one to take.

The issue with the extended time of MW application brought a domino effect on the course. The “A glimpse of me” that was meant as an opening activity took the portion of time that should be used to deliver the main material of the reading course. As a consequence, the teacher and students were eventually unable to cover all the learning objectives of the day. For the teacher, she felt two losses: first, she could not reach the instructional objectives of the day’s reading class and she did not explore and provide appropriate feedback on the students’ writing because of the time constraint.

A similar issue was faced in the second session. The vignette was also provided at the opening stage of the lesson. The vignette was created as a means to remind students to do their structured out-of-class tasks and to mitigate and anticipate what might happen during the students’ study. The students’ responses were varied and generally hinted at divergency. However, more than 60 percent of the students did not follow the word limitation cue. The time spent for the students to write down their opinions also exceeded the time allocation. This eventually distracted the flow of the reading class activities and material delivery.

Considering the time-related issues in the first two sessions, the framed writing activity that was conducted in the third session was carried out at the closing stage. This allows students to extend the time for writing without taking the class time. Interestingly, all students could finish the 3-2-1 framed writing relatively on time. One of the focal respondents, Juna, said that the task was ‘clearer’ and ‘easier’ than the earlier word-limited writing. Similarly, Michael noted that his writing was guided by the frame and it helped him to stay focused.

In the fourth session, the frame was placed at the opening stage again after considering the result of the third session. Excluding the time to watch the two movie trailers and to give a brief explanation of ABC the frame, the students were told to write in 15 minutes and most of them were able to complete it in time, only a few took a longer time. While it might be premature, in this study, it seems that the framed writing was more time efficient than the word limit.

Material dan Lesson Design Constraint

Reflecting on the result of classroom observation on the implementation of MW, it was evident that the embedded MW confused the teacher as to which to focus (reading class or students’ writing), and when. On the one hand, leaving the students writing behind was felt ‘not right’ because the teacher saw some potential to build a critical dialog with the students based on their answers to the tasks. The teacher

also thought that it was a waste to not provide form focused feedback and discuss the students' writing to improve their future writing. But to focus on the writing issues right away after the students submit the writing means focusing on different learning materials and objectives. Also, that would hinder the attainment of the reading course's learning objectives since class time was devoted for writing instead.

As an embedded activity, MW implementation was problematic. Theoretically, MW is part of any course and can be promoted at any class. But this study reveals that MW that was implemented to students with no prior MW experience caused confusion and inefficiency. The two framed writing activities which worked better than the word limit cue the importance of clarity of task. The prompt in the frameworks as 'a guide as they write' and as a controller that provides a perimeter for the students writing. Ferlazzo (2018) also reported that with the frame, the MW activity can be effective.

Meanwhile, with the word limited composition, the 'creative space' for the students is wider but at the same time, with a higher degree of 'openness', it is also challenging for the students to produce the writing. In this matter, designing the use of MW in a class requires careful planning and consideration, particularly if it is implemented as embedded activity in classes other than writing and in classes in which the students have no prior experience of MW

3.2. Divergency and Creativity of the Students' Answers

Apart from the challenges in the implementation, this study found two different results on students' divergency and creativity. In the first word-limited activities, the artifact of the students' writing showcased relatively homogeneous responses. The information provided in their self-description was a similar one to another and commonly included: name, age, date of birth, and address.

A dialogue that was built after the students responded to the task made a respondent, Juna, realized that nothing had improved in how he delivered the introduction from that when he learned English for the first time in elementary school. Hana, another student, detailed that the type of information, the order, and the diction were monotonous. Michael added that if he were to write again, he might come up with different ways and aspects of self-description. He noted that his earlier writing production was merely based on 'habit' without putting too much thinking into the expected answer and creative ways of doing.

After the critical dialogue in the first session, the students' responses to the following MW tasks were relatively more divergent as seen in the aspect of fluency. The improvement in terms of fluency (divergency) resonates with that of Marlin and Halpern (2011) who mentioned that the gain of critical thinking (including divergent thinking) is best achieved through explicit teaching.

Despite the positive result in divergency, in terms creativity, indices that include originality and imaginative ideas were absent. The ideas presented by the students in response to the prompts were varied but ideas were relatively predicted, no new or fresh idea was found. Imaginative ideas were not observed and is likely to be caused by the prompts/ questions that do not invite or trigger students to

manipulate or improved existing ideas. Prompts such as writing different ending of a story, replacing titles, or combining characters in narratives may be more appropriate to examine the ‘imaginative’ aspect. In brief, the observation and analysis on the students work using the creativity rubric is summarised in table 1.

Table 1. Summary of artefact analysis and observation

Aspect	Description	MW 1	MW 2	MW 3	MW4
Fluency	Students can easily/ be relatively fast come up with lists of numerous answers/ ideas	Variation 1/ Time 20 mins	Variation 9/ Time 7 mins	Variation 16/ Time 10 mins	Variation 17/ Time 15 mins
Inquisitive	Students indicate curiosity as reflected in their act of asking question and questioning (wondering); exploring, investigating, seeking answers (exploring and investigating) to their questions and make critical examination (challenging assumptions) of the answers they get.	0	0	2	1
Originality	Students generate many clever, unique or unusual ideas	N	N	N	N
Imaginative	Students plays with the generated ideas, they involve manipulating it (including making new amalgam), trying it out, and improving it.	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

(rubric adapted from Lucas, 2016)

The table shows that in the aspect of fluency, the trend of time needed to produce answers seems to increase but this should not be used to indicate regression in terms of fluency. The time the students need to write was instead more efficient the more the students were familiar with the MW. The increase amount of time was dependent to prompts and the expected responses. Meanwhile, the inquisitiveness was also observed as lacking but no solid conclusion can be drawn from this finding because there could be several explanations can be offered to reason this lack which this study had not been able to examine further.

Involvement of all

Observation notes of the four sessions revealed that the key to divergency and creativity was the prompt or questions of the MW tasks. The questions/ prompts were open, in terms of form and answers. All students were able to provide answers/ responses and each answer was unique, i.e. each answer resonates with each student’s opinion and experience. Since everyone in the class had the answer and can answer, one was left behind.

Since everyone is involved and each of the students had a unique answer, as a class, the responses become heterogeneous. Through the use Padlet, all gathered perspectives/ ideas/ opinions were shared. The class member could see that their friends might have similar and different thinking on

the same issue. Juna upon looking at his friends' answers on Padlet exclaimed "*O iya ya...bisa...bisa [while laughing]*" as an expression of him embracing other's opinions and perspectives.

Safe task

The MW provides a safe task for every student to engage in because of the 'openness' of the questions. The questions allow various responses and there were no right or wrong answers. Everyone answered the questions based on his/ her own opinion and perception. The observation notes indicated a degree of comfort and low anxiety when students did the MW. They did not hesitate to provide immediate responses to the prompts in the MW and answers were relatively varied except that in the first session.

Since the students did not focus on providing 'the right' answer, they could pay more attention to the content (idea) of their answers. As indicated by the students' responses, they could come up with different scenarios and possibilities to respond to the prompts. Michele and Hana articulated that they felt they were invited to share their voices through the task and felt that they would not be judged. This 'safe' environment is believed to be facilitating for the students to develop their creativity. This finding resounds what Ferlazzo (2018) experienced in his class. He noted that his students were "typically more motivated to write and share their responses to these ['creative'] prompts while building higher-order thinking skills."

Pieces of evidence from the students' responses to the vignette in the second session showed that not only they were able to see the issue from the students but also from the lecturer's point of view. Criticism of both parties was identified in their responses. Some insightful causes of the case portrayed in the vignette were found. New ideas were also identified as the students proposes activities for the next lesson (1-2-3 framed writing - third session).

4. Conclusion

This study found that the major issue with the implementation of micro writing in EFL classrooms is the design, particularly when implemented as an embedded instead of core activities in courses other than writing. Embedding MW in a course that does not focus on writing when the students are not familiar with MW caused confusion and distraction toward the attainment of the course objective. It is therefore suggested that the students be familiar with MW before it is embedded in any courses. A special session to introduce and practice MW should be provided as one of the core activities in a writing course. This study also revealed that questions/ prompts of the MW are the key to nurturing divergent/ creative thinking. Open-ended questions that invite multiple accepted answers will facilitate students' involvement because they feel that their voices are invited and that it is safe to respond. This implies that the use of MW activities could be used to elicit either convergent or divergent thinking depending on the questions/ prompts. Thus, teachers could make use of the MW activities for different purposes.

Based on the findings, future research could look into the development of a design that allows the incorporation of MW for different purposes and examine its efficiency and effectiveness.

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