



“Impressing Heaven”: Creative Non-Fiction as Reflective Practice in Foreign Language Teaching and Cross Cultural Study

Barbara Waldern

Busan University of Foreign Studies (Republic of Korea)

Edwise2008@gmail.com

Abstract

*The subject of this poster is my collection of short stories about career decisions and experience interacting in English on the part of actual young adult learners of English as a foreign language in South Korea. (See *Impressing Heaven* by Barbara Waldern, July 2012 Smashwords ISBN: 9781476467023). After getting acquainted with a few individuals, I remembered them and thought about our conversations. Then I imagined their real life situations as they had confided in me, or envisioned how develops transpired or would transpire in their lives. I interwove their narrations with my narration of my experience with them to put myself in the shoes of others. This collection thereby serves as a journalistic reflection of some of my first encounters with such students of English as well as a preservation of memories. Given the artistic approach to this work, it is not proper social science although it is a useful exploratory activity, and can be used as one tool of reflective practice in educating, understanding, or relating to a particular cultural group as an outsider. The message of this poster is how this form of journal keeping serves reflective practice and could contribute to sound methodological and anthropological study as an additional tool of ethnographic research and pedagogical research.*

The subject of this paper is my experience writing a teacher's journal using creative writing. *Impressing Heaven* (Waldern, 2012, Smashwords Inc. ISBN: 9781476467023) is a collection of short stories based on real conversations with real young adult learners of English in South Korea from 2007 to 2010. You might call the genre creative non-fiction. As these individuals relayed their life situations and dilemmas to me, I imagined the unfolding drama of struggling with identity, negotiating global English, and making career decisions, putting myself in their shoes to reflect deeply on their situation as young adult learners of English in South Korea. It is therefore an example of the production and use of a journal in reflective (foreign language) teaching.

As far as I know, teachers who use journal writing as a method of self-reflection of teaching simply describe and reflect on the lesson planning, the lesson planning process, the application of the methods in the classroom and the observed implementation, and the student responses to the methods. They usually discuss how successful the methods have been and how the methods might be developed or substituted. They might also discuss the teacher-student relationship.

All journal writing is simultaneously an investigative method and a learning process. Teachers often employ journal writing as a student activity in their classes to facilitate and extend learning. Speaking at a local KOTESOL symposium for teachers primarily on methods of teaching English as a foreign language in April, a colleague, David Schaffer, citing Dymont & O'Connell (2003) in defining of the function of journals as tools of reflection.

“One of the most recognized uses of journals is to help facilitate reflection, a critical component of the experiential education cycle. Through journals, students can record a concrete experience, reflect on and record their observations about the experience, integrate the observation into abstract concepts or theories, and use the theories to make decisions or solve problems.” [1].

The colleague made a second citation in his presentation, quoting Fritson, Forrest and Bohl (2011): “Students become more engaged and more reflective of both the course material and how to best learn” [1].



This quote brings up the point that journal writing, by aiding reflection, makes the author more engaged with himself and the environment. Engagement is another goal of journal composition. It is an outcome of recording observations, noting responses, and thinking about them. Journal writing, then, can bring about social and psychological consequences.

What about the teacher writing his or her own journal so as to facilitate learning about teaching, and learning about students? Humble and Sharp [2], experts in qualitative research methods themselves, wrote about their project of keeping and sharing a journal about their experience in teaching graduate students. Using Flavell's term "metacognition," they claim that journal writing enhances metacognitive awareness, and they identified three benefits of teacher journal writing through their project: clarity, confidence and connection. They further quote Kaplan, Rupley, Sparks and Holcomb (2007) who claim that journaling for educators enhances the educator's learning through examination, clarification and critique of pedagogical ideas and practices over both the short and long term. They all say that pedagogical reflection can take any of four forms: descriptive writing, (b) descriptive reflection, (c) dialogic reflection, and (d) critical reflection.

My experiment, however, is a reflection of the context, identity and purpose of the learner in acquiring English proficiency through formal schooling and other means. In addition, it is an examination of the relationship between a teacher of English as a foreign language, and learners of English as a foreign language, though not all particular students of that teacher. My project was an exercise in thinking about the English language learners I had been meeting in the first years of my life in South Korea, not all of whom were my students.

It must be pointed out that this project did not begin as a reflective journal writing project, though it was a result of reflection of my role and experience as a teacher, in and outside the class. Rather, the journal writing began by accident. It really arose out of my growing interest in writing creatively. I thought I would be writing short fictional stories with fictional characters inspired by real people. As I began to write, the memory of a few of the young adult learners of English as a foreign language in my personal encounters and conversations with them kept occupying my mind at that time. I found myself writing about them and their actual words and circumstances instead of inventing stories as a way of recording as well as relishing memories. The work was creative in that I extended or filled in gaps of their stories as they had told them to me, imagining how they must have experienced certain life episodes I knew had occurred, or how resolutions to their questions and decision-making processes may have played out. Thus, I was equipped with facts, and I dramatized anecdotes of my experience with them or the anecdotes of their lives that they had described to me on paper. It was later that I realized I had, in fact, composed a sort of journal, though not a type of journal I had ever heard about. I found it was a good way to review things, and that reviewing had benefits for teaching and for strangers in a strange land.

All the same, I used caution in that I changed names and some of the circumstances so as not to expose the real people involved. As it had begun as a personal and private exercise, I had not sought the permission of the subjects. Using creative fiction, though, allows me to bring to light the stories of the people I met so that others can learn about them, even other students, while concealing the identity of the characters in the stories who were real-life figures.

The presentations of these characters and the stories from their real lives are positive. I used a positive perspective, that is optimistic and focused on the good things though, of course, problems and dilemmas are the springboards for each story. Each character meets with success in life after addressing questions or struggling with a conflict in determining and carrying out their study and career paths related to their interest in and use of English.

I first decided to prepare and print out the pages of these stories in order to use them as material in a senior level university discussion class, adding discussion questions and a glossary of most of the more difficult vocabulary for this class, and that is the version of e-book that exists to date.



The title of the work sums up my findings of this project. “Impressing Heaven” refers to a saying in the Korean language, which is, “Heaven will be impressed if you are very sincere and industrious. (지성이면 감천이다).” It is good clue to the work ethic of Korea. For one thing, hard work is a sign of authenticity. The idea is that hard work is more than just a means to achieve prosperity; it is also a moral question and an indication of fine character. A hard working person will be recognized and praised in the afterlife. There will be more rewards bestowed by Heaven if one is sincere and industrious. Korean children are taught to dream big and persevere in working industriously. It is an aspect of the nation building project of the society, as a matter of fact. The saying thus reveals a simultaneously romantic view that is nonetheless materialistic. Being industrious means producing and giving to others, for which Heaven will pay one back eventually. The stories exposed the existence of these ideals, and the conflicts and contradictions in contemporary lives of English learners in South Korean society. For example, one story highlighted the competitive environment of the learner and working person. Another story brought to light the relationships between students and families, including the conflicting concerns and demands of family on their growing children. A third story exposed the tough and exasperating realities of working life for Koreans using English at work.

Writing about these learners and reflecting on them has brought about many benefits. I gained a lot of insight through this kind of reflection. It has helped me to understand the culture in which I work, the context in which English is being taught and learned, the range of specific goals that these learners hold dear, and some of the obstacles to their career development and implementation of the learned language at work. Specifically, this project highlighted three areas of the concerns of students: struggling with identity, negotiating global English, and making career decisions. Specifically, this project highlighted three areas of the concerns of students: struggling with identity, negotiating global English, and making career decisions. Furthermore, I have been able to use the stories as a teaching material, and shared it with other teachers for their consideration.

Using the creative writing technique has enhanced my reflective process and enhanced my understanding, lending me more insight than I would have had had I simply written a standard journal. Also, this form of journal writing is not about the teacher, although the teacher often exists as a character in the stories. Creative non-fiction allows the teacher to reflect more deeply about who he or she is teaching, why the students are there and what they want and what kind of challenges they face, and how the teaching of a foreign language can affect students’ lives. At the same time, creative non-fiction in pedagogical journal writing can help the teacher to reflect more on how she perceives her students, how she is teaching them, what she thinks students ought to gain from her teaching, the nature of the educational system and work life in the society where her students and she lives and works, and what students want from the teacher-student relationship. This technique could also be a form of supplementary data gathering and analysis in social research, including ethnography. I know I am definitely more informed and more aware after having written these stories, reviewed them, used them in the classroom and shared them in discussions of pedagogy and qualitative methods of research.

References

- [1] Schaffer, David (2014) Presentation notes entitled “Journal Portfolio Project” for the annual Spring Symposium of Busan-Gyeongnam Korea TESOL at Busan National University on April 12, 2014.
- [2] Humble and Sharp (2012, p.2-3) *The Qualitative Report* 2012 Volume 17, Article 96, 1-19
<http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17/humble.pdf>