The effectiveness of creative writing in language learners’ development and success

Effektiviteten av kreativt skrivande på språkinlärarens utveckling och framgång

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Abstract

This study focuses on how creative writing can affect students language development and if the motivation can be increased with an expressional practice. Writing is a significant skill for students’ education and according to Skolverket (2023) students needs to practice to be able to succeed in their lives, both professionally and personally. Though several studies has been conducted on the area of creative writing, it has not lead to any major adjustments within the educational system. I will also investigate whether creative writing could be beneficial for students academical development or if there is no connection between the two most common styles in writing. Sweden focus on educating comfortable and confident English speakers and is a leading country in educating second language learners. The English education in Sweden, has been ranked as number one in proficiency but has now descended on that list and this study investigates if creative writing could help us regain out previous status (Education First, 2022). Motivation and expression is of great importance for students’ development and this study will give us an answer whether we could use creative writing to give our students the proper tools for success.

Key Terms: academic writing, creative writing, language development
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1. Introduction

The Swedish students are required to learn the English language in school from a young age. The syllabus mentions that during English classes, students should be introduced to different levels of language skills from third grade, with increasing difficulty. By language skills I am referring to reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Writing is a major part of every language and is one of the two productive skills actively used when interacting with others. In school, students are exposed to different forms of writing, creative or academic, however, there seems to be a conflict between the styles (Olthouse, 2012). Academic writing is more focused on the higher educational purpose such as university, while creative writing is more connected to fiction and poetry, to mention a few. Picture a classroom, and you see 30 young adults and the majority has no clue about what is next in life. Suppose that teachers only would focus on teaching the students academic writing. In that case, it could lead to a loss of interest from those who have no plans to continue their education to higher levels after graduating from upper secondary school. Creative writing, however, would not exclude anyone because every student needs to be able to express themselves in text.

Things are not always fun and easy, neither in school nor in life; the same goes for writing. According to Senel (2018), writing is one of the most challenging skills in language learning, therefore students often express a negative attitude towards the extensive writing process. If you are "forced" to write a text about a subject you have no interest in, it tends to become boring. Their motivation can decrease, and they can also struggle to get started and keep focus. When people are required to do something to reach a grade, for example, learn grammar to pass the exam, it becomes a must, and simply a means to an end. Turn learning into a must usually puts much pressure on students and can sometimes take away the enjoyable part of education. Tanya Manning-Lewis (2019) argues that writing often is met by a negative attitude because students need to learn this to reach the requirements. In addition, it is not reflected on as a way to communicate with people outside the country borders. According to Ekaterina Arshavskaya (2015), creative writing could be a way to engage those students that have less motivation. Arshavskaya (2015) argues that students, with the help of the creative genres being presented, may find writing fun and engaging, thereby developing their language skills. Almost everything has to do with interest, since school is a more proper place, especially in the higher levels before university, the academic form is sometimes
prioritized over creative writing. Therefore students sometimes do not get equal possibilities to write texts on subjects they are interested in.

Looking at the skill of writing and what it means, writing is a productive skill together with speaking, they are similar, and the only significant difference is that one is spoken and the other is written. Nevertheless, they are our way to communicate with someone, and our receptive skills, such as listening and reading, is our way to understand the other part of the communication. Students need to be exposed to both academic and formal language and more informal and daily language, and the same goes for writing. They should get opportunities to try writing in different genres, but there is a disagreement about how it should be taught in the classroom. The syllabus does not clarify how much or how the time should be divided between academic and creative. A study has shown that students who got a chance to do creative writing during the semester got higher success in their academic writing because they got several chances to develop their writing skills and usage off different vocabulary (Senel, 2018).

Skolverket (2023) presents the syllabus for English 5 in upper secondary, stating that students should be able to communicate orally and in different contexts. It also clearly says that it should also be in more formal ways, for example, argumentation or discussion. After the finished course, knowledge requirements tell the students that they should be able to make themselves understood through some variations and relatively coherent. The requirements do increase alongside going up through the school system. Pentryna Venuta (2020) demonstrates that students who are allowed to try different writing styles are more likely to develop as readers since all language skills are connected. She uses her experience with teaching to argue that creative writing is barely used in the classroom, therefore, her article shows that the academic and creative styles could collaborate. According to the regulations for English learning in upper secondary school, it is essential to be exposed to different styles and genres. Depending on what language is used, writing and speaking can be directed to different target groups, such as students, children, and academics. It is essential to provide students with a vocabulary appropriate for what the exercise is focused on. Vocabulary is vital for all language skills and helps us control what message others receive from us. Especially in second language learning, this is something that students need to rely heavily on their teacher (Echevarria & Goldenberg, 2017).
2. Aim and Research Questions

Language learning in Sweden is not only directed towards the native language, but also several others, therefore the four skills is vital to posses for each student. English is one of the core subjects in Swedish schools, so teachers are required to teach students a large amount of knowledge so they can continue their life outside of the classroom in an international world. English is spoken worldwide, so students need to learn it, moreover, writing is one way of communication; therefore, it is of utmost importance for students to develop written language skills.

Writing is not only putting words on paper, but the skill to use words to deliver a message to an audience based on different purposes. In this paper, I will see how the two styles can use each other and how creative writing can be used in the classroom.

My research questions are thus as follows:

- How can creative writing enhance students' writing skills and motivation?
- To what extent can creative writing help students develop within the academic style?
3. Method

For this research, I have used two different methods for collecting articles and studies that I could use to ground my research about creative and academic writing in the classroom. First, electronic searches in educational databases have been my primary method. Secondly, snowballing that entails I go through reference lists of articles that fall under the same category as my paper.

3.1 Search Delimitation

Searching in databases is complex and slow; it is time-consuming, and some previous knowledge of how to navigate through them is very helpful. Using long sentences can be problematic; therefore, I used specific keywords to find compelling and relatable articles. I have used ERIC via EBSCO, which I got access to from the MAU Library database, to search for articles that could help me build my paper.

I began to search with ”creative writing” and ”academic writing” with gave me 91 articles, and I found six of them useful for my purpose and possible to use to answer my research questions. I did similar searches but with different relevant words, and most of them ended up with several articles that was doable to go through, and I found ten that I wanted to use. Writing is an area very commonly researched, and many studies have been made on subjects related to it. However, it does not seem like the comparison or collaboration between creative and academic writing has been studied as thoroughly. Even though I could find some, many of those I chose not to include were made on university students, which could be interesting, but still, I wanted to find something closer to my target group. So I did research where I used ”Creative and academic,” and I got 3 857 matches, and too narrow it down, I added ”writing development.” By combining these two searches, I got 33 results, two of which were interesting. I did not have to filter my searches since most were done after 2000, which felt recent enough for my study.

I did also use snowballing, where I used some of my chosen articles from my database search and scrolled down to their reference list to see if I could find further exciting research, and I found three more articles to use.
3.2 Inclusion Criteria

I have primarily focused on studies on second language learners since English is a second language in Sweden. However, I have looked at studies with languages other than Swedish and English, mostly since language learning is similar everywhere. Writing is used in both first and second language, so I did not completely exclude first-language learners since it could still be significantly useful research for my paper. I wanted to find most results with students as close to upper secondary as possible, so early state higher education and 7-9 grade could also be used. Finally, I wanted articles from 2000 up to today.

3.3 Exclusion criteria

Much of the research had been made on older students or adult language learners, which I did not feel was usable for this paper. Since writing was a search word, many results were only focused on writing in general, and I wanted to concentrate more on educational studies. I did not feel comfortable including articles about a specific theory or model, so I excluded these from my references.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion Criteria

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<th>Search words</th>
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<th>Number of references used</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creative writing + Academic writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creative writing + Motivation + Education</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
4. Results

This section will present different perspectives on the subject researched in this paper. The two headings are based on the research questions in the order that the questions were presented. The primary research will be introduced in the following subheadings.

4.1 Increasing Motivation and the Skill to Write

Writing has been well researched through the years, and how students could be inspired to develop their writing skills. They need the motivation to write to be able to forget the perception of writing as dull. For example, Olthouse (2012) argues that students have various views on different styles, and they affect them differently, primarily due to the outcome of both styles. Academic is viewed as more valuable, while creative writing has a more “natural” and personal connection to the writer. Both approaches are a way for students to express themselves and also understand more of the language. In the educational environment, academic factors, such as spelling and grammar, are prioritized over creativity in the classroom. Students in the study claimed that writing became an escape from reality, pressure, and stress (Olthouse, 2012). Teachers have the vital role of helping students develop their writing, by introducing creative writing exercises in the class, the students to be enlightened to see outside of the strict structure and let the fantasy take over.

Another study that focuses on the connection between motivating students and creative writing is presented by Arshavskaya (2015), who mentions that students often struggle with low confidence in their second language. Creative writing would come with several benefits but also with enthusiasm. Assignments often focus on grammar and spelling, but by not focusing on that, students can experience a higher motivation to write since they can write more freely. Furthermore, to express themselves in a language different from their own, they need to feel comfortable both in fluency and vocabulary, creative writing could help with that. It does likewise help to develop the skill of writing, and the better writers they become, the easier they can switch from creative to academic. Moreover, Arshavskaya (2015) argues that by making writing enjoyable and personal, the development would be close behind, and students could find the motivation to write more than just grammatically correct and academically appropriate.
Manning-Lewis (2019) demonstrates that teachers must maintain students' creative side and not only target the goals of the curriculum, they should get opportunities to develop outside of what is required to pass exams. Language development is a significant aspect of expressing your feelings, and teachers are vital for helping students possess that skill. Since students are required to use the language outside of school, they need to be exposed to more daily vocabulary rather than only academic ones. Aiming to reach a satisfying grade can cause fear, anxiety and create a hatred towards writing, on the other hand, creative writing could release some of that pressure. Instead it can help students understand that they can, via their writing, reach an audience wider than just the teacher, the educational society, and the academic world (Manning-Lewis, 2019). Creative writing does, according to the study, affects positivity on critical thinking and writing skills.

As previous studies mentioned, creative writing give students an environment where creativity and the wish to express themselves are encouraged; Turkben (2019) agrees. Turkben (2019) states that the most challenging skill is writing, and with the help of assignments in the creative style, students would effectively develop their language. To say that writing is essential is not to be overlooked; it is a way to express what is on our minds. The results of Turkben (2019) shows that those students who did work with creative writing did better than those who did not, their academic success became higher than before. It contributed to several other fields since writing can connect many subjects. Self-efficacy is a vital part of academic society, and the more confident writers use their voices, the easier the work becomes. Creative writing is a beneficial approach to develop that.

Finally, Banegas and Lowe (2021) claims that exposing learners to creative writing that focuses on the students’ inner voice could increase motivation for learning. Writing can target different audiences depending on what language is used by the writer, and the same goes for types of styles of writing. For example, writing a poem or a comic requires a specific language, which can, accordingly to Banegas & Lowe (2021), bring out higher levels of desire to learn and develop. In addition, students who get to write something interesting have an immense opportunity to find the exercise meaningful and intriguing.

All the studies presented above clearly see creative writing as a positive factor in enhancing motivation among students. However, Manning-Lewis (2019) does argue that students tend to see writing as tedious and time-consuming, because of that students' motivation decreases significantly.
Olthouse (2012) determined that students being exposed to creative writing get to open their minds and let the words flow without the pressure of academic correctness.

4.2 A Connection - Creative and Academic Writing

The studies mentioned in the previous subheading focused on the affects of creative writing on students' motivation. This part will focus on connecting the creative and academic writing styles and the research on the subject has presented exciting results for my area of interest.

Özdas and Batdi (2017) presents that students who can see the positive outcomes of writing also often succeed with writing in different styles and structures. Firstly, it is essential to understand that creative thinking and writing must be introduced and nurtured in school because of the syllabus and for students' future achievements. A confident writer, comfortable with the language, increases their possibilities to reach academic goals and understand different texts. Students' development can be placed in several categories, and the skill to transfer words and thoughts from mind to paper is present in many of those. Giving students opportunities to practice both their creative and academic sides enhances their development. Academic success does depend on students being able to process their thoughts and arguments, which would be practiced during creative writing exercises (Özdas & Batdi, 2017).

School is mainly focused on grades, and students who have high goals for themselves need to pay attention to their grades, because without them, the chance of reaching their goals decreases significantly. A way to minimize the risk of students becoming scared and stressed is to implement an environment where students can perform without fear and pressure by letting creative writing be a part of it (Dali, Lau & Risk, 2015). By helping students write texts not based on research or facts and simply fundamental fantasy and imagination, they develop their language skills and become closer to the bigger goal. Academic writing depends on critical thinking being a skill inhabited by students, and according to Dali, Lau, and Risk (2015), creative thinking could be helpful to posses that specific skill. By letting students forget about grades and being supported by studies, they can think more directly about what they write and not how they write or if they write the correct word and reference, making writing more amusing and satisfying.

Venuta (2020) argues that exposure to different writing styles is a great way to grow as a writer. To write is always to put words together to form a text of our choice, no matter if it is in academic
fields or creative ones. Therefore, it is essential to be aware that the two styles focus on very different targets. Venuta (2020) states that creative writing should never be considered less valuable than academic writing, even though it seems to be the case in several educational systems. Creative writing is being overlooked, and with that, the assets it could bring to students. Primarily due to the goal of preparing students for their careers, whatever they may be, however, creative writing can provide something crucial for every writer in any form, a deep understanding of a text. Preparing for further education and a job career is undeniable practical, but creative writing provide tools useful to reach further within the academic fields through writing.

One of the most vital voices on the subject of the importance of creative writing is Senel (2018), that argues that creative writing should have a higher presence in the steering documents for English. Since writing is considered one of the most challenging and complex skills within language learning, it comes with negative aspects, such as fear of failure. A way to prevent that is to have profoundly motivated teachers and students; this could, according to Senel (2018), be done with creative writing assignments. Through creative writing students' academic success could increase significantly; it gives them more opportunities to practice their writing and reach the confidence they need to aim for the academic level and language. Writing should be exciting and something that motivates the students by being allowed to express their feelings and not based on something scientific or researched. If not, it can cause several negative emotions, and students will try to avoid writing and probably struggle with every exercise provided.

If students want to succeed in academic society, they must master the academic language. Echevarria and Goldenberg (2017) points out in their research that students require exposure to language appropriate to the field. Writing, in general, is fully based on vocabulary knowledge, and teachers are vital in helping students gain access to a word pool large enough to express themselves. Creative writing is not an exception to the vocabulary base needed, therefore creative writing in itself would not be a direct tool to reach academic success, but Echervarria and Goldenberg (2017) do not say it would not be beneficial. They do, however, imply that students should be given a chance to encounter texts and words in authentic environments, which would help them with the receptive and productive language skills. Teachers' lectures and exercises of academic material are crucial for students to increase their chances of success in school, specifically with academic goals.

It is clear that there are different views on how much creative writing can help students develop within the academic field, but there have been some results telling us that there is a connection
between the two styles. According to the studies in this paper, creative writing should have earned a more prominent role in the language classroom since it enhances students' academic success and motivation in an essential and complex language skill.
5. Discussion

English is a core subject in Swedish schools, and to even reach the requirements to go to upper secondary school, you need to have a passing grade in English (Skolverket, 2023). Furthermore, to get a degree from upper secondary, you must pass a certain number of credits and some courses in specific, one of which is English (Skolverket, 2021). Since writing is one of the language skills, it is demanded that teachers make sure students learn or at least have the opportunity to learn to express themselves in text. Senel (2018) mentions that writing is one of the most demanding and challenging skills to obtain as a learner, and RahmtAllah (2020) does agree with the challenging statement and adds that it is even more so for second language learners. Another typical perception amongst students is that writing is boring, which becomes an issue when teachers try to motivate their students to write to develop into confident writers in any subject, not limited to only languages (Firek, 2006). Even though students need to understand how to structure a text or build a sentence, they only believe they need it to pass exams. The thought of developing as a communicator does not get lifted by teachers enough according to Firek (2006). The feeling of writing something ”silly” or not academically correct can cause a fear of failing and not learning what is vital to pass the course unless teachers explain that writing does not always have to be academic (Blue, 2006).

Writing and speaking are the skills to express yourself in any social context, without these skills communication would be almost impossible in any language. Hanci-Azizoglu (2018) describes that the curriculum hardly mentions the creative aspect of writing, even though the proficiency of creative writing has been questioned, there is research about its significance. According to Skolverket (2021), the syllabus for English 5 does not specify that students should write with a creative approach, however, they are required to be able to write appropriately, following their audience. This leaves space for interpretation for the teachers, but do not forget that it is stated in the steering documents that students should be exposed to formal language. To add to Hanci-Azizoglu's (2018) statement about missing the creative approach in the curriculum, Senel (2018) agrees that it should be integrated with the other requirements. Teachers should help students learn how to communicate in a formal environment and also in their everyday life, thus more informal situations. It is two different vocabularies depending on the writing style, and the academic is the one that students usually do not encounter (Echevarria & Goldenberg (2017). Therefore, teachers focus on the formal language while teaching since they need to be exposed to it so students can
learn. Echevarria and Goldenberg (2017) claims that students should get authentic contexts during the learning process of a language, mostly to prepare them for real life encounters. Students' grades are affected by their understanding of a language, but with motivation the grades most likely will be higher, this could be achieved by using creative writing assignments (Banegas & Lowe, 2021).

Writing can be complex and challenging, especially for second-language learners (Turkben, 2019). By doing something enjoyable and interesting, the possibility to reduce and, hopefully, prevent anxiety, fear, or any other negative feelings that students connect to writing would increase. Academic writing is rarely personal; therefore, it can be considered disconnected from the writers since teachers have already chosen the topic or subject. By adding creative writing, the students uncover the free and open path toward a text of their choice, which Arshavskaya (2015) argues would boost motivation. This motivation could be use to succeed, not only in language learning but in general education and life. Of course, every student is different, and they will all have various opinions and react differently to each task. Though creative writing is slightly more informal, teachers can never escape the fact that some students will struggle, but by making the the writing exercise meaningful and exciting, they hopefully get them in the right direction (Blue, 2006). Özdas and Batdi (2017) writes in their article that bringing creative exercises into the classroom would push students' opinion, about writing, closer to the positive side. They can express feelings, interests, and thoughts without judgment; their identity shines through via the words on the paper. Personality and feelings are absent in the academic writing style; it is strictly structured and executed based on facts and research (Hains-Wesson, 2013).

Academic writing is well-known as a respected and educated way of writing, however, authors of famous fiction books are rarely considered. Creative writing does not have the same respect, and in academic cycles, that becomes even more clear. The boundaries between the two styles are argued by Antoniou and Moriarty (2008) to be relatively blurry, they could learn from eachother since they share some more basic elements. If students master the writing technique expressively, they could benefit from that, while writing academically, and creative writing has proven to have an apparent positive effect on that specific skill. Academic writing skill is something fundamental in education, but since students are not exposed to it very often, teachers need to know how to help them get introduced to the field (Echevarria & Goldenberg, 2017). Expressing thoughts or arguments is one of the most apparent outcomes when writing skills have been achieved, and creative writing does have a significant effect on developing their expression (Turkben, 2019). Furthermore, academic
writing does also require the writer to be able to express the contents of their research, meaning that students would benefit from practicing creative writing, since that would prepare them for understanding the text. It could give them more and various opportunities to become well-developed writers (Arshavskaya, 2015).

Olthouse (2012) shows that even though the educational system prepares students for further studies at university, many students do not intend to continue their education or a writing career. Nonetheless, they still require the ability to write since writing is a communicative skill, sending an email to a company or a text message to a friend. Moreover, students encounter the daily language outside the school buildings, and Swedish students do not encounter English that much, for example, at the mall. Nevertheless, watching movies, series, or listening to music exposes the Swedish population to more informal English, but the academic language is rarely present in their everyday life. Students need to be able to use the more common English language, and creative writing does provide students opportunities to practice that (Manning-Lewis, 2019). Creative writing tends to be overlooked together with all of the benefits, and Venuta (2020) is critical towards the loss of all the outcomes students could gain from experiencing creative exercises in classrooms. Students missing out on opportunities to develop their language skills do not only apply to language courses such as English or Swedish but also to other subjects, for example, history and social science (Firek, 2006).

To reach a dream career after education is a goal several students have, but to get there they are deepening on their grades and they should never be undermined. Motivation to succeed is nothing less than beneficial; Banegas and Lowe (2021) provide several arguments that creative writing increases motivation and has a general positive influence on students' grades. Moreover, authentic situations and gaining a deeper understanding of texts helps the students develop significantly. To communicate in a language, especially a foreign one, students should be able to express themselves confidently. Therefore, it is essential to create an environment in the classroom where students do not become scared or anxious when writing is practiced (Senel, 2018). Dali, Lau, and Risk (2015) argue that creative writing is the path to creating a joyful feeling toward the productive skills. In classrooms, it is vital that educators hear and see every student, and by using creative writing exercises, each student can express THEIR identity and personal interests (Hanci-Azizoglu, 2018). The academic style will also benefit from students' practice in creative writing; they both play an essential role in students' lives. Academic is more focused on further education and work-related
expressions, at the same time, the creative is more in our daily situations and the one every students need to know about and understand.

Finally, writing is critical; being able to write is a road to something bigger. Meaning writing can bring us closer to our dream career or goal in life; therefore, it should not be neglected, neither of the styles, academic or creative (Dali, Lou & Risk, 2015). Both genres should have a place in every language classroom, and Swedish students deserve to get several possibilities to develop and become confident and comfortable with the English language. Helping them make language learning meaningful and effective can produce more motivated writers and learners.
6. Conclusion

Through this research, I wanted to know if creative writing should have a more prominent place in language learning or positively affect students' motivation and development within academic writing. Archavskaya (2015) claimed that creative writing is a method to increase motivation and change writing interpretation into something positive rather than negative. Several articles support that theory and that educators should recognize the benefits of creative thinking. Motivation is essential for students' success in general, but Senel (2018) also argues that it does have a positive influence on students writing, leading to higher developments in academic fields. To expose language learners to different genres and authentic situations, will help them when they come in contact with the language in real life. Vocabulary is essential and is one difference between academic and creative writing. Therefore, teachers must remember to help students reach a comfortable volume of words appropriate for each style (Firek, 2006).

This study is applicable in most language classrooms since writing is a crucial part of every language. Nevertheless, students who struggle with difficulties with writing, for example, dyslexia, may not be included in this study. It is mainly directed to students without difficulties based in medicine, needing more help than teachers can give. However, research about this area of how much creative writing can provide students with enjoyable situations, students could benefit from this. It could be interesting to see if students' motivation, in a Swedish upper secondary class, will increase if they become exposed to creative writing where they can express their thoughts. According to Education First (2022), Sweden has decreased in rank with proficiency from #1 in 2018 to #7 in 2022. Something should be done to increase our proficiency again, starting in our educational system.

The result of this study opened an interest in me to see whether it could be would be beneficial for students to write about quite basic areas, for example, sports or food. Could their enjoyable subject be applicable for academic papers rather than just a creative one. I would try to give some classes an exercise where they were to write a text supported by facts about something they find compelling. Would that provide them with positive feelings towards writing. I would like to this in qualitative method, therefore, it would have some limitation but I would argue that deeper understanding of how the students opinions develop or if it stays the same.
References:


