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LET’S FANTASIZE: TEACHING CREATIVE WRITING THROUGH FANFICTION

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Rezumat. Acest articol își propune să confirme ipoteza că scrierea creativă prin fanfiction este nu numai distractivă, ci și utilă în învățarea limbii engleze. Cu acest scop, a fost realizat un experiment care a implicat studenți din anul III la Universitatea de Stat Cahul „B.P. Hasdeu” într-o sarcină de scriere creativă bazată pe o operă literară la alegerea lor. Experimentul a presupus patru scenarii pentru remodelarea creativă a romanului original în ceea ce privește dezvoltarea conținutului, inserarea/excluderea unui personaj și schimbarea anturajului. Rezultatele studiului au fost consolidate de evaluarea participanților cu privire la eficiența sarcinilor și a dificultăților care ar putea descuraja creativitatea și munca în echipă. Analiza produselor creative finale și a sugestiilor studenților au fost luate în considerare pentru a elabora recomandări de sporire a eficienței sarcinilor bazate pe fanfiction în vederea realizării cu succes ale acestora.

Cuvinte cheie: fanfiction, scriere creativă, abilități la nivel înalt, gândire critică, etc.

Introduction

Recent trends in education have led to a proliferation of studies focusing on creative thinking. To foster creativity in the EFL classroom means to encourage students’ freedom to choose activities/ tasks/responsibilities/partners as well as to give priority to language application. Among the many ways of developing creative thinking, creative writing teaching is an issue teachers address most often since students are often framed in the content, topics or assignments they do not like or do not find interesting. Given the challenges students face when carrying out creative tasks, this paper attempts to illustrate the usefulness of teaching creative writing through fanfiction and to demonstrate that it can significantly raise their motivation, involvement, and language production.

Theoretical Background

There are relatively few theoretical studies in the area of teaching creative writing through fanfiction; most literature can be found on websites that provide rather practical content on using fiction, samples of mentor texts, and classroom activities. Yet, authors agree that fanfiction is a fictional product “based on pre-existing fictional work” [1, n.p.; 2, n.p.] written by students’ (fans) at their choice. This definition highlights the creative aspect of writing which is meant to foster students’ abilities to develop an existing plot and change settings, characters or the storyline. Shannon Sauro [3, n. p.] supports this idea claiming that fanfiction refers to “writing that continues, interrupts, reimagines or just riffs on stories and characters other people have already written about”. When reimagining a story, the students also get the freedom to work out their own manner of writing or to comply with the style of the original author. Thus, the students’ implication is encouraged, their writing style—welcomed, and their decisions to

collaborate or work individually – respected. Despite most suggested texts being fictional, studies of fanfiction suggest going beyond the frame of literary characters and considering historical figures or other actual personalities at students’ choice [4, n. p.]. Thus, tasks and ways of recreating original text can be varied depending on the students’ preferences and interests.

Bringing fanfiction assignments in the classroom will provide new insights into teaching creative writing and will reshape the concept of writing skills development. When dealing with “raw material” [5, n.p.] students will activate high level skills such as critical and creative thinking to further generate ideas, fantasize options, insert characters. Building the classroom around the students’ interests will increase their motivation to begin, continue or insert themselves as characters in their favourite book, short story, film, or TV show. Raising students’ involvement in the activity will encourage their abilities to collaborate on a written project and to share responsibilities. By doing collaborative writing on a fanfiction project, students will be able to carry out peer review and therefore develop active reading and critical thinking skills. Apart from the above-mentioned high-level skills, collaborative writing through fanfiction will reinforce students’ digital skills when being assigned to use web tools such as GoogleDocs, or Padlet which allow them to work synchronously while brainstorming ideas, drafting the text, and correcting mistakes. Creative writing tasks through fanfiction can be assigned in the form of digital stories where students can upload pictures, their own drawings, and captions which will narrate the plot, present characters, change the end, etc. To create digital fanfiction stories, students can use tools like Narrable, Utellstory, Storybird, Storyjumper, etc. With high-level skills reinforced and digital tools at work, students can develop their identity as writers, try their hand at preserving the original fiction style or develop their own writing style. This is possible only after they form a better understanding of a literary piece and identify the specificities of developing a descriptive or narrative plot. This being done, students will become active learners and their level of engagement will increase because they will do what they love.

Research Methodology

The study uses qualitative analysis of various types of fanfiction assignments in order to gain insights into how students develop creative thinking through individual and collaborative writing. Furthermore, the research is intended to evaluate the effectiveness of creative writing assignments and to determine the factors that cause difficulties in order to help students to overcome them. With these purposes in mind, students specializing in English Philology were involved in individual and collaborative fanfiction assignments based on chapter 8 of the novel “To Sir with Love” by E.R. Braithwaile. The students reached a mutual agreement on the choice of the original text and decided to preserve the author’s style. The students were divided into four groups and were given the following assignments:

- Group 1. Writing a Prequel: The students must invent a chapter preceding the one they have read.
- Group 2. Writing a Sequel: The students must invent a chapter following the one they have read.
- Group 3. Change the setting of the story: Firstly, the students are recommended to identify the setting of the original chapter and to trace the descriptive details which illustrate the geographical/ immediate time and place of the actions. Secondly, they must place the characters in a different temporal/ geographical setting and give the plot a new

development taking into account the new circumstances. Students can also follow Jessop’s [6, p.32] recommendation “to zoom in or out to describe part of the setting not mentioned in the original.

- Group 4. Changing characters: There are several options: students may change the protagonist, secondary characters; they may also exclude or add characters. Another option might be inserting themselves in the story as a protagonist and narrating the story from their own perspective. Firstly, the students are advised to brainstorm or create a mind map on the new character’s traits. Then, according to Jessop’s [6, p. 32] suggestion, students must include a conversation between the new character with the protagonist or with other characters describing thus features reflected in his manner of self- expression, vocabulary, and style. Choosing from the given options, the students will develop decision-making skills and creativity.

To increase the assignment efficiency, a rubric had been designed and given access to students before they started working on the assignment. The assessment criteria are illustrated in the table below:

Table1. Assessment Rubric.

Name: _____				
Total: ____ 10 points				
Criteria	Excellent (2 points)	Average (1 point)	Below Average (0 points)	Comments
Creativity (2p.)	Overall the work is highly creative. The students used their own original ideas as a group.	The work is somewhat creative.	The students failed to submit the assignment or there can be traced attempts of plagiarism.	
Language use and style (2p.)	The writers use the language and the original style effectively. The writers use the required number of words and phrases on the topic.	The speaker uses some of the language and the original style effectively. There are some errors present in the use of language and style in context. The writers use some, not all of the required words/phrases.	The speaker uses a minimal language and style on the topic. The vocabulary is not used correctly in context.	
Organizat	Evidence of planning	Logical order	attempt at	

ion (2p.)	and logical order allow readers to easily move through the composition. • clear beginning and ending • effective linking words and phrases • sense of wholeness	allows reader to move through the composition without confusion. • has a beginning and ending • some linking words and phrases	organization • weak beginning, ending • may lack linking words and phrases	
Mechanics (2p.)	The writers demonstrate correct spelling and excellent use of grammar.	The writers have the correct spelling with some minor errors. There are some minor errors in the use of grammar.	The writers have major spelling and grammar errors.	
Contribution (2p.)	Both writers cooperate successfully and contribute to chapter writing to an equal extent	Both writers somewhat cooperate and contribute to chapter writing to different extents	The writers fail to cooperate. They make a minimal contribution to the writing process.	

Accessing the rubric, each group could acquire a clear understanding of what they are expected to do and which requirements they should meet. Besides measuring the level of creativity, which is a very important criterion, the students must take into consideration such details as text organization, vocabulary, style, mechanics, and contribution. The latter is very important too as is essential in building collaboration, responsibility, and autonomy.

Discussion

The present study was designed to determine the effect of using fanfiction in creative writing and to confirm the hypothesis that when involved in creative project activities that they like and are interested in, students can increase high-level skills and improve their mastering of language.

One interesting finding is that students were excited to try collaborative writing and it did not take long to agree on the original text which they further used as a source for reimagining the storyline.

The results of this assignment indicate that most students understood the assignment and did their best to reshape the original text. The most successful turned out to be the groups 2 and 3. They showed outstanding creativity and good collaboration.

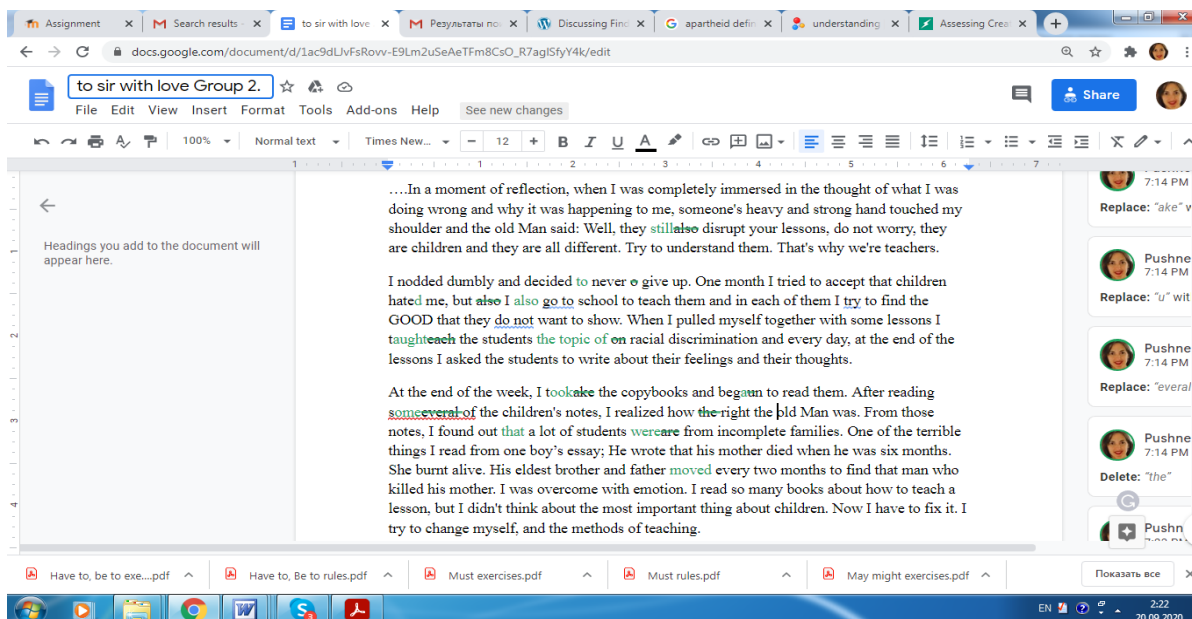


Figura 1. Sample of Fanfiction Creative Writing (Group 2).

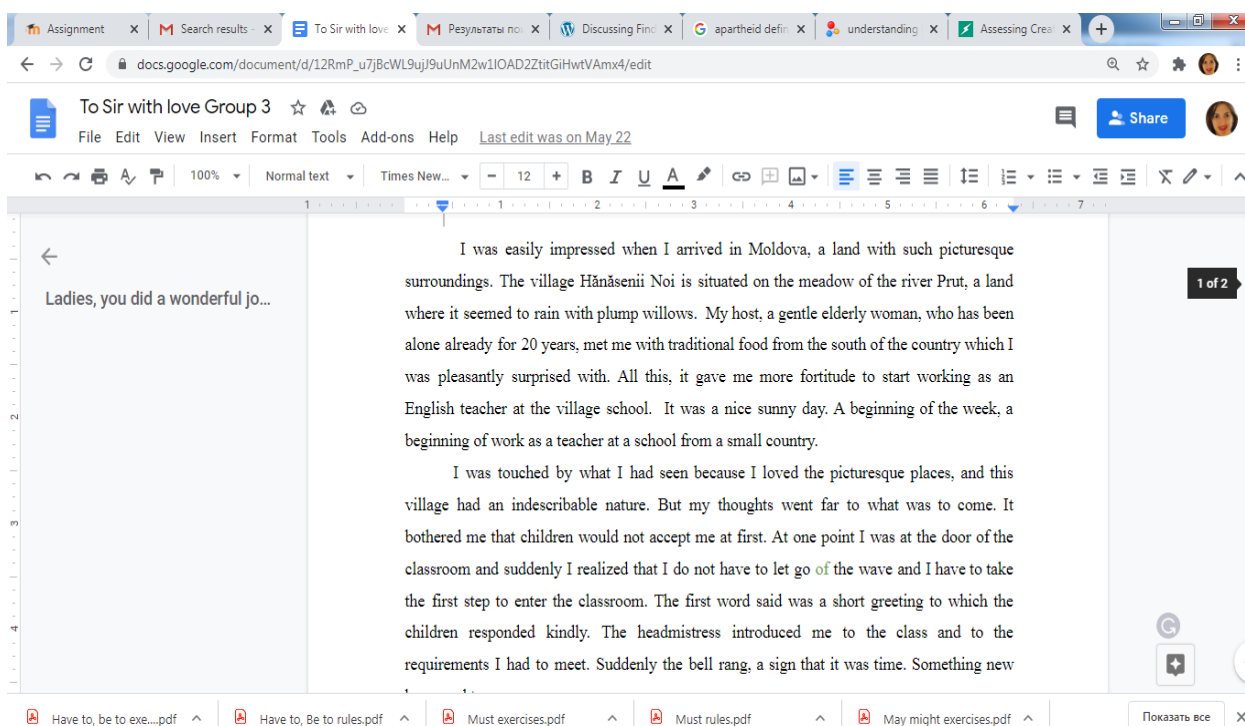


Figura. 2 Sample of Fanfiction Creative Writing (Group 3).

Other groups needed more guidance in terms of sharing responsibility and peer review. Despite reporting some difficulties in drafting the text and handling with the original author's style, this experiment did not detect any evidence for attempts to plagiarize. This is a good index in terms of creativity enhancement. It must also be mentioned that students used mind maps and other brainstorming techniques when generating ideas.

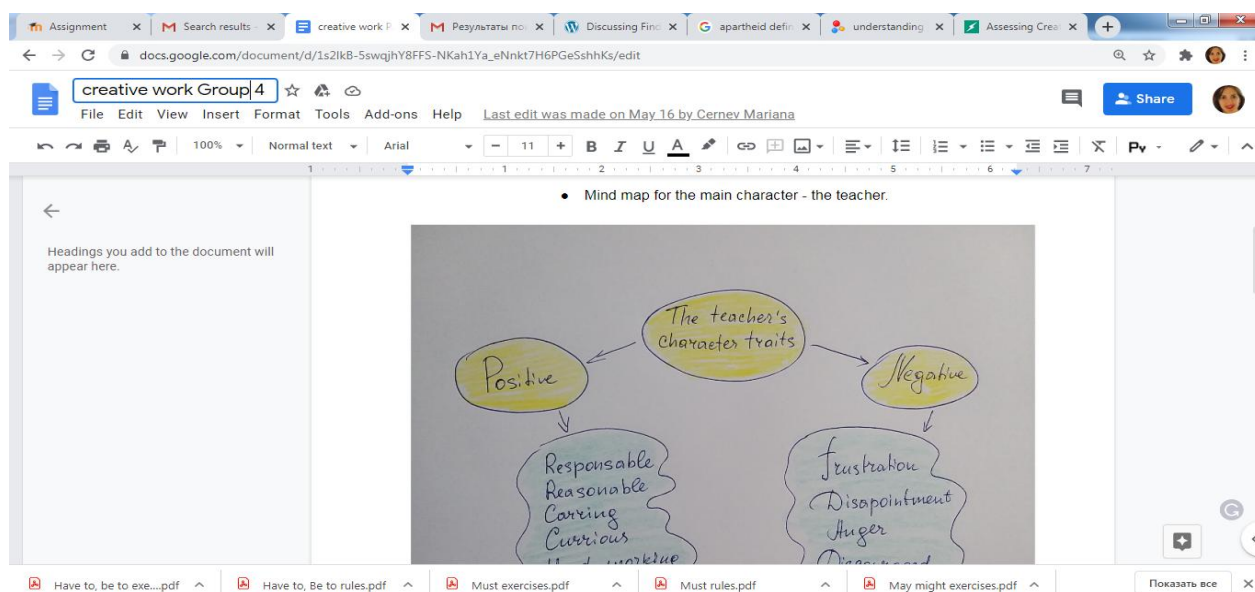


Figura 3. Sample of Mindmap (Group 4).

When asked what the further fanfiction creative writing task improvement might be, some students mentioned that they would rather work in pairs so that their amount of contribution could be traced more easily and they could faster reach an agreement on storyline development, choice of characters, etc. These suggestions may be explained by the fact that it is quite difficult to assess the amount of contribution in groups of 4-5 students especially when they disagree when sharing responsibilities. Yet, this inconvenience can be solved by guiding the students throughout the process and giving suggestions on role distribution and rotation within a group or between groups.

Findings

Managing creative writing projects comes along with much excitement, tremendous efforts of keeping collaboration and mutual respect going, and rising students' motivation to create. On the other hand, it requires responsibility, team work, and analytical thinking during peer review.

The purpose of this experiment was to enable students to use their critical and creative writing skills when focusing on a fanfiction assignment based on the novel they chose to assess the task efficiency and the difficulties they faced during the writing process. What stands out in their feedback survey is that all the participants were excited about doing something different from what they usually did and choosing the original novel for the fanfiction task. Further analysis demonstrates that clear task formulation and rubric are very useful when doing a written assignment since having clearly formulated criteria helps the students meet the requirements. They also acknowledged that ideas generating techniques such as mind maps, brainstorming, polling were really productive. The students were asked to indicate which difficulties they had during the whole process. The results show that collaboration was effective in most cases but students had some difficulties when sharing responsibilities and preserving the original writing style. It turned out that team work was quite a challenge for some groups in terms of decision making, being respectful, and making their contribution to the assignment. When asked to suggest some recommendations in order to increase task efficiency, some students suggested

replacing groups by pairs to further increase the amount of contribution and to facilitate the process of measuring it. Some students needed assistance when doing peer review and creating and operating with Google apps (GoogleDocs); luckily there were many online tutorials available so that the digital problem was rapidly fixed. As far as peer review is concerned, the students were advised to consider the stylistic specificities of the original text as well as using grammar corrector apps such as grammarly, dictionary of collocation, and thesaurus. The students confirmed the free easy access to these tools easy efficiency.

Conclusions

The present study was designed to determine the effect of fanfiction writing on creative writing skills improvement. The study has identified the advantages of using fanfiction tasks involving the students in a writing experiment. The participants confirmed that fanfiction-based assignments made a significant difference to what they were used to do before in terms of originality, critical thinking and team work skills enhancement. They also reported on the difficulties they had when writing and suggested ways of rising creative writing efficiency. These findings suggest that in general veering away from the traditional scenario might bring novelty in the classroom and raise the students' implications in what they are interested to write about. All in all, this study strengthens the idea that fanfiction is valuable through high-level skills development and the increasing involvement in the learning process.

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