CREATIVE WRITING ACTIVITIES FOR EXPLORING SEVENTH GRADERS' WRITTEN DISCOURSE COMPETENCE

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Abstract

This project proposes Creative Writing as a pedagogical strategy to improve 7th graders' written discourse competence. Creative Writing is described as a chance to experiment freely with language, and it helps to develop an efficient composing process in a meaningful environment. This paper describes a research project carried out at Técnico Comercial School in Jenesano Boyacá, with nine 7th graders as a sample. This was an action research study. Students' writing, a final test, and a semi-structured final interview were used as data collection instruments. The findings from this study reveal students' improvements through the use of strategies to produce coherent and cohesive texts. Furthermore, the findings indicate students' advancements in written production, characterized by the use of discourse elements throughout the body of the text.

Resumen

Este proyecto propuso como estrategia pedagógica "Textos creativos" para mejorar el nivel de inglés en la habilidad escritural. Los "Textos creativos" fueron asumidos como una oportunidad que permitió experimentar libremente con el lenguaje y ayudó a desarrollar el proceso de composición en un ambiente significativo. Esta investigación se llevó a cabo en el Instituto Técnico Comercial de Jenesano, Boyacá, con 9 estudiantes del grado 7° como muestra. Esta fue una investigación acción, en la que la producción escrita de los estudiantes, una prueba final y una entrevista final semi-estructurada fueron los instrumentos utilizados para recoger la información. Los resultados obtenidos del análisis de datos revelaron el mejoramiento de la competencia discursiva en los escritos de los estudiantes debido a las estrategias que los estudiantes utilizaron para obtener composiciones coherentes. Del mismo modo,

Key words: creative writing, writing process, writings, writing skills, discourse competence.

las producciones escritas de los estudiantes se caracterizaron por el uso de elementos discursivos a lo largo del texto.

Palabras claves: Textos creativos, proceso escritural, escritos, habilidades de escritura, competencia discursiva.

INTRODUCTION

The main motivation behind this study was to provide my students with a meaningful environment for English learning where they could communicate their interests through coherent texts.

Writing is a skill that enables students to plan and rethink the communication process. Writing practices provide the students with the chance to focus on both linguistic accuracy and content organization. I have noticed from my experience that English writing instruction only focuses on mechanic exercises far from students' context. Besides, writing is not a matter of transcribing language into written symbols. Essentially "it is a thinking process in its own right. Writing demands conscious intellectual effort, which usually has to be sustained over a considerable period of time…" (White and Arndt 1991, p: 3). Therefore, it is essential to generate spaces in which our students can focus on the process of writing in a foreign language. This allows them to have more opportunities for language processing.

Why creative writing activities? Creative writing suggests imaginative tasks such as writing poetry, stories, letters and songs that get students highly motivated to compose with a purpose; that is, creative writing activities use writing as a medium to give sense to student experiences and to communicate them to others. In agreement with Davies (1998), by means of creative writing activities, learners can express themselves by experimenting freely with language and by developing an efficient composition. At the same time, coherence and cohesion, the complex part of the language, can be developed. My concern in this study is to get my students to express their own experiences coherently through a creative text in order to be heard and understood with interest by others.

From my experience, I was familiar with my students' performance in English composition classes. Firstly, the students demonstrated deficiencies in expressing coherent ideas in their written production. They could not explain pictures or real situations appropriately. They wrote fewer sentences and they were not understandable. Secondly, most students demonstrated a passive attitude when asked to participate in writing activities proposed to develop skills in class. On the other hand, there is little external motivation to learn English. I work in a school where there are people from the countryside. They come to study here with all kinds of expectations and

predictions in their heads, but most of them are not interested in learning English. They have grown up far from access to libraries, technology, and the Internet, which are all tools that could help them go beyond the classroom and to get more motivated in the English learning processes. Besides, many students do not realize the importance of learning English, because they do not always view a connection between English proficiency and their future job expectations.

In order to get more information about students' English writing skills, I designed and applied a questionnaire to explore, first, the principal difficulties that 7th grade students have in English writing; second, about what kinds of texts they like to write, and, third, the topics in which students are interested in writing. According to the results of the questionnaire, in which students ranked writing difficulties in order of importance from 1 to 6, 7th grade students selected "use of vocabulary" as a principal difficulty they have when writing. Other difficulties: "applying structures, use of expressions, meaning of text, use of connectors, and use of punctuation marks" are listed respectively in order of importance, as reported by students.

The diagnostic test was applied to confirm the difficulties that 7th grade students had in writing English texts. The test consisted of an exercise in which 7th grade students chose a picture of one person taped to the board, and then they wrote paragraphs imagining that they were that person. They had to concentrate on details like jobs, hobbies, likes, dislikes, feelings, and fears.

After analyzing this writing exercise, the diagnostic test revealed that in most of the students' writings there were no comprehensible sentences, sequence of ideas or relationships among the elements. Therefore, those students performed poorly. Some of them were placed in the good performance category, because their writing presented some comprehensible sentences, some sequence of ideas and some relationship among elements. Few students had comprehensible sentences, a sequence of ideas along the text, and relationship among the elements in their productions, but those few who did manage all three criteria received very good performance markings.

Bearing the previous in mind, I decided to concentrate on what an implementation of creative writing activities reveals about 7th graders' discourse competence in their writing production.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing in the EFL classroom, creative writing, and discourse competence are the main concepts that support this research study.

Writing in the EFL classroom

Writing implies more than the transcription of the language into written symbols. Writing, both in the foreign language and in the mother tongue, is a mental process using formal structures in such a way that students can create actual meaning with the ideas they have in their heads and can translate them into written form. In this way, "good writing is an extension of clear thinking and writing competence is how the writer makes meaning in written language" (Mitchell, 1996, p: 4).

Since writing demands a conscious intellectual effort, it is considered to be a complex task by the majority of students and teachers in our institutions. The fact is, we find that our students do not like to write. They prefer other "interesting activities" instead of devoting time to writing. Besides the general disinterest in writing in the classroom, we found that students who endure the act of writing are extremely unconfident and unenthusiastic writers. Perhaps they have never written much in their first language, so writing in a foreign language proves extremely difficult and learners prefer to avoid it. Or perhaps they think that they do not have anything to say and cannot come up with ideas to express in written texts.

Bearing in mind these different situations related to students' negative attitudes towards the act of writing, it is important to highlight the role of the teacher. "The key to an effective school writing program is a teacher who knows how to use, to find, and to create situations and context in which pupils feel engaged in writing and grow in their skill" (Rojas, 2005, p: 32). From this perspective, I became essentially a guide to help my students build writing habits so that they accepted writing as a normal part of the classroom routine and participated in writing tasks with as much enthusiasm as they did in other activities. One way of creating this environment was to give them interesting and enjoyable assignments to complete. For example, short stories, poems, and songs provide the motivation for this kind of innovative work to be established, as I will expose in the following lines.

Creative writing

Creative writing is employed in my study as one of the main concepts to support the meaningful environment in which the act of writing must be developed. Creative writing is the result of analyzing different resources that minimize students' anxieties towards writing, because creative writing allows students to "experiment freely with language and to help to develop an efficient composing process" (Davies, 1998, p: 25).

Creative writing utilizes imaginative tasks, such as writing poetry, stories, letters, songs and plays. These kinds of texts involve students in the development of meaningful activities that allow them to express their own views and ideas. This personal aspect of writing provides powerful motivation to find the right words to express such intimate experiences. In other words, 'the act of composing should become the result of a genuine need to express one's personal feelings, experience, or reactions, all within a climate of encouragement' (Zamel, 1976, p: 67). In this sense, my role as a teacher is to guide and encourage students to steadily build up the creative text, starting with simple phrases and sentences before expanding into the whole composition.

How to involve students in creative writing activities?

The practice of developing creative writing activities involves understanding composition as a process to help students to understand their own productions, to give students time to write and rewrite, and to provide students with feedback by means of individual

conferences between teacher and student during the course of the composition. From this perspective, creative writing activities are designed taking into account three important stages proposed by O'Malley and Valdez (1996), in which students are involved in producing their own texts.

The first step is concerned with **pre-writing activities** that are related to finding topics, generating and focusing on ideas, and planning schemata. Villanueva (2006) says that different activities and materials can help the teacher introduce key vocabulary and strengthen concept association to activate both formal and content schemata. Brainstorming can be used to find an appropriate plan from which to write, to develop a topic, or to organize ideas. 'Brainstorm is a way to associate ideas and stimulate thinking'. (Smalley, Ruetten and Kozirev, 2001, p: 4). Using questions can be a good point at which to start because 'these yield interesting answers'. (White and Arndt, 1991, p: 22). Using a series of questions stimulates thinking, draws on students' own experiences, and develops and shapes their ideas.

The second step, the **writing activity**, concerns the composition itself. This stage requires that the teacher guides and monitors students in order for them 'to translate plans into provisional text' (Tribble, 1996, p:112) constituting the final product.

Finally, **post-writing activities,** the third step, include revising, modifying, deleting, adding, and editing ideas in order to improve the writing assignment. Composing and drafting do not usually mark the end point of the writing process. According to Byrne (1997), it is possible to correct something in class, while students are still engaged in writing and everything is fresh in their minds.

During the writing process, the teacher must provide appropriate feedback to learners, and opportunities should be provided for students to edit and revise their work. Hedge (1994) proposes a popular procedure called *conferencing.* Through careful questioning, the teacher can support students in gathering and organizing ideas and then finding the appropriate language to express them. One method of providing feedback is to indicate mistakes by underlining them and then using a system of symbols to focus the attention of students on the kinds of mistakes they have made. The following chart is taken from a model proposed by Byrne (1997).

SYMBOL	MEANING	EXAMPLE
S	Incorrect spelling	**S S** I recieved jour letter
W.O.	Wrong word order	**W.O.** We know well this city
T	Wrong tense	**T** If he will come, it will be late
P	Punctuation wrong	**P P** Whats your name
WF	Wrong form	**WF** We want that you come

From my point of view, when students become familiar with the teacher's feedback, they are promoted to the autonomous learning stage, during which they become aware of the mistakes they make and take the initiative to correct them independently.

I can conclude that creative writing activities support my study, because they are a space in which, on the one hand, students are guided in a meaningful environment to think about what to say on a piece of paper, and on the other hand, to learn how to say it. Students become familiar with the resources needed to translate their own experiences into written form, accounting for a discourse competence in terms of coherence and cohesion that I will present in the following lines.

Discourse competence

As I mentioned before, discourse competence entails the cohesion and coherence of the text, which a writer must take into account to make papers readable and understandable for the audience.

Coherence refers to the way a text makes sense to the reader through the organization of its content and the relevance and clarity of its concepts and ideas. In other words, the concept of coherence is taken as "…the organization of our sentences into a text, into a whole which is as explicit as possible and so complete itself, that we are able (or hope to be able) to communicate successfully with our reader through the medium of writing" (Byrne, 1997, p: 2).

For this study, cohesion, in agreement with Jurado (1998), is explained as the relationship among the elements of a text:

the use of links, relations and hierarchies between statements in order to produce a paragraph. The use of connectors is seen as an element that links the ideas and evidence in a logical order throughout the text.

Another aspect of coherence that deserves special attention is grammar. There is perhaps no subject more debated by language teachers than the placement of grammar in language teaching. Some language professionals do not consider grammar to be an important element in English learning and teaching. In this respect, I consider it necessary to teach grammar in the classroom, and I focus on how best it should be taught. In agreement with Mendoza (2004, p: 16), "the role of explicit grammar teaching strategies in the classroom has to be re-considered and re-defined."

The fact is that the act of writing involves "not only syntactic and lexical knowledge, but also the capacity to generate and organize ideas and thoughts in a way that can be clearly and coherently communicated to a potential reader" (Quintero, 2008, p: 8). Keeping these considerations in mind, my proposal aims to provide more opportunities for language processing in order to minimize the feeling of panic while writing and to aid students in overcoming these challenges.

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

In the following lines, I present a detailed description about an instructional design that helped me to organize and support the development of students' involvement in creative writing activities.

This instructional design is focused on a "task-based approach that is regarded as developing from a focus on classroom processes" (Richards, 1990, p: 27). The methodology that guided this implementation is based on the principle of language learning by using instructional tasks that allow students to develop pre-writing, writing and post-writing activities. Thus, different tasks were designed to produce creative writing through an environment of confidence, which contributed to students' success in expressing their ideas into a coherent text.

The data gathered from a questionnaire allowed me to design four workshops (Appendix 9): writing a letter, writing your own song, writing your own poem, and writing a short story.

Now, I describe three main stages, pre-writing, writing, and post-writing, proposed by O'malley and Valdez (1996), which I followed in the development of each workshop. The objective of pre-writing activities is to guide students in the task of starting to compose. This activity consisted of brainstorming lists of vocabulary words and sentences in some workshops, and of answering questions in others. Time was designated to explain vocabulary, concepts, and content in order to clarify students' doubts related to the use of vocabulary terms, how to form a sentence or a paragraph, or how to write a letter, a song, a poem, or a short story.

During the first step of the writing process, students wrote their first draft. Students were guided by specific prompts that varied according to the kind of text worked on in each workshop. Students also took into account the ideas they developed throughout pre-writing activities.

The post-writing process was a stage that included revising, modifying, deleting, adding ideas, and editing. At this level, students needed a significant amount of guidance in their approach to a final effective text. The teacher provided students with positive feedback through conferencing, during which the teacher, after reading students' writing, met students individually to support them in organizing ideas and finding appropriate language. In this matter, the teacher indicated the type and placement of students' mistakes by using symbols. Students composed between three and four drafts. Some final drafts required further corrections, but I understood that it was not beneficial to tire or frustrate students to get perfect compositions. Instead of striving for immediate perfection, it was essential to me that students became familiar with making corrections gradually.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study is a qualitative research study because the description and interpretation of students' artifacts, a semi-structured final interview, and a final test allowed me to group the information into categories and subcategories in order to gain understanding about what students' writings revealed about their written discourse competence. Brown and Rodgers (2002) describe qualitative research as research that includes various different non-numerical techniques for gathering data, including observations, field notes, diaries, questionnaires, interviews, etc.

This is an action research study. In agreement with Wallace (1998), my study involves the collection and analysis of data related to students' written production and students'

performance when writing. In the same way, Bailey (2001) says it consists of collecting and interpreting data that includes repeated cycles of procedures. Thus, action research involves a dynamic and complementary process, which consists of five essential steps: exploring, planning, action, observation and reflection.

This project took place at Técnico Comercial School in Jenesano. Jenesano is a small town located 45 minutes from Tunja. It has only one public school: Técnico Comercial School, and there are eighteen rural primary schools. Técnico Comercial School places a strong emphasis on commercial and technological subjects. This year this school has a population of 713 students. Most of them are from the countryside and their economic resources are low. They are stratified in levels one and two. Moreover, most of the families of this institution have a low cultural awareness and education level.

The population selected at random for this study was 9 students, chosen out of an entire group of thirtysix 7th graders. They ranged in age from 11 to 13 years old. Four students were from the countryside and the others lived in the urban area.

Data collection procedures

With the purpose of collecting data to answer my research questions, I considered the use of student´s artifacts, a final test, and a semi-structured final interview. Students' artifacts were the tools that revealed what students wrote and how they wrote it in each creative writing activity. The final test was used to characterize students' written production by comparing it with the diagnostic test. The semi-structured final interview was designed and applied to each participant to get information concerning student experiences during the development of creative writing activities, and to evaluate their performance in their written discourse competence through different contexts.

DATA ANALYSIS

This data analysis was a systematic procedure by which I gave "order, structure and meaning to the data to discover what [was] underneath the surface" (Hubbard and Power, 1993, p: 65) of the students' written productions. Three instruments were used for collecting data: students' artifacts, a final test and a semi-structured final interview.

After collecting and analyzing the information, some aspects between the instruments were found to be in common. These commonalities allowed me to identify two categories and some subcategories that helped me to answer the research questions posed in this study. These categories and subcategories can be seen in Chart 1:

Chart 1. Categories and subcategories

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	CATEGORIES	SUBCATEGORIES
MAIN QUESTION What does an implementation of creative writing activities reveal about 7th graders' written discourse competence?	Students' accomplishment of written discourse competence by using strategies to create coherent and cohesive texts.	- Learning to use feedback as a way to make compositions understandable. - Resorting to teachers as the main support in the EFL classroom. - Telling extraordinary situations or moments from students' own experiences.
SUB-QUESTION What characterizes 7th graders' written production when emerging from creative writing activities?	- By using discourse elements along the body of the text.	

Students' accomplishment in their written discourse competence by using strategies to produce coherent and cohesive texts

Creative writing activities provided students a meaningful environment in which to develop compensatory strategies to help them overcome difficulties when writing. In this way, students organized their ideas in a comprehensible way in order to be read and understood.

This category emphasizes the importance of students becoming aware that there are different methods they can use to face the act of writing in a positive way. Students used three strategies throughout each creative writing activity that became subcategories: *learning to use feedback as a way to create clear compositions*, *resorting to the teacher as the main support in the EFL classroom,* and *telling fantastic situations or moments from their own experiences*. In the following lines, I present each subcategory with students' supporting data.

Learning to use feedback as a way to make compositions understandable. Feedback constituted an essential strategy used by students because it provided them with opportunities to learn and make improvements to their writing. Regarding this aspect, "composing and drafting do not usually mark the end point of the writing process. At the very least, writers are continuously reading through what they have written and making corrections to ensure both clarity of expression and factual and grammatical accuracy" (Tribble, 1996, p: 115). The task of composing various written drafts before producing a final version was a difficult step in the first creative writing activity, because students were not accustomed to drafting, revising or editing their texts. They were used to only receiving a final mark on their composition.

Following Byrne's (1997) recommendations, feedback was provided to students through the use of correction symbols that indicated to them which and where the mistakes were in their written work. These codes were written into the body of the text itself. I found that this subcategory was characterized by positive and effective feedback that encouraged students to try again and to restate the words and sentences to express their ideas in a logical way. Students made an effort to learn to interpret the symbols given by the teacher.

I present a sample, in which the process of feedback was carried out.
First writing, taken from "Writing a letter".
First Creative Writing activity.

Hello Alejandra
           ws   **wv**   **ws/sm/vm**
how are you? **The** I **wand** tell you who **le** but I don´t
             wv
 know How I **benig**
                   wv   **wc**   **ws/sm/vm**
The sun is pretty. Iam **have long fond my The** my
 Frinendly
sm   **sm/vm**
Am my charmed here but in treer day Bye Bye …
              I LOVE YOU

Students were focused on correcting mistakes taking into account the following symbols:

SM	Subject missing	**WS**	Wrong subject
VM	Verb missing	**WV**	Wrong verb
CM	Complement missing	**WC**	Wrong complement

The symbols were explained in detail, one by one. In this way, Sonia corrected her own mistakes. For example, when Sonia found SM (subject missing), she understood that she had to write in the subject, because it was absent in her original draft. In the second draft, Sonia made mistakes with complements that were missing and with the verbs "begin" and "take". Sonia wrote three drafts. Thus, the third and final draft was:

> Hello Alejandra
> how are you? I want tell you who I am but I
> don´t know How I begin
> The sun is pretty. I am taking a sun I am with
> friends.
> I am charmed here but in treer day I go back
> Bye Bye
> I LOVE YOU

The following excerpt shows what students felt when facing the task of drafting, revising or editing their text. I used symbols to refer to each source of data as SA= Students' Artifacts, I= Interview, DT= Diagnostic Test, and T= Final test:

"433 Pues… cuando empezamos me pareció jartisímo pues era mucho trabajo. Era la
434 primera vez que yo tenía que corregir yo mismo lo que había escrito. Después con
435 las indicaciones de la profesora sabía dónde estaba el error y… cuál era… "(Camilo. I, p.15)

"153 Umm… si fue difícil al comienzo porque no entendía pero después… la profe con
154 esos símbolos fue fácil…nos decía qué teníamos que corregir. Al final, veía que lo
155 había escrito quedaba mejor… mejor porque mi texto tenía mas sentido, se veía…
156 como más ordenado."(Jenifer. I, p. 5)

- *Resorting to the teacher as the main support in the EFL classroom*
Nowadays, the teacher should be able to adopt a variety of roles in the classroom: knowing the students' needs, facilitating the teaching-learning process, organizing resources, acting as a guide during classroom activities, and developing student skills, among others. "Being democratic and letting students participate in decision-making takes more effort and organization than controlling the class from the front." (Harmer, 2007, p: 107). In this study, from the beginning of the implementation, the teacher was a facilitator. His role was essential to help students succeed throughout the writing process.

Likewise, there is a close relationship between the teacher and feedback. The effect of the feedback on the whole process of writing depends upon how the teacher responds to his or her students. In addition, "instead of constraining learners because they do not produce correct writing, teachers should act as facilitators, organizing writing experiences that enable the barrier to develop effective composing strategies" (Richards, 1990, cited by Quintero, 2008, p: 14).

On the other hand, through creative writing activities, I noticed that the relationship between the teacher and students was also crucial. The teacher has to be aware of what students are doing and, when possible, how they are feeling when writing. This subcategory was characterized by a sense of facilitating the learning process since the

role of the teacher was rather that of a resource than a transmitter of knowledge. Thus, Erick and Yerson stated:

216 Yo utilizaba el diccionario; pero éste trae mucha información eee entonces yo no
217 entendía, pues yo finalmente le preguntaba a la profesora. A veces a mis
218 compañeros. Pero, yo le creo más a la profe. (Erick. I, p. 7)

20 Los códigos que la profesora me decía indicaban los errores que yo tenía, asi yo sabía
21 qué tenía que corregir… y si yo no entendía, ella me explicaba otra vez. Así me parece
22 más fácil escribir en inglés.(Yerson. I, p. 1)

Telling special situations or moments from students' personal experiences
Creative writing activities constitute an opportunity for students to write about extraordinary moments in coherent and cohesive texts, since this kind of writing allows participants to use a variety of procedures and topics to find the right words to express their own experiences. My students became comfortable enough to reach deep within themselves to produce and share beautiful and special situations by means of poem, song, and short story.

This subcategory has to do with the great influence of television and movies on students. They are always identifying with their favorite characters and their stories. The content of their stories allowed me to perceive how the creative writing activity, "writing a short story," in which students invented a story to apologize to the teacher for being late for class, engaged and inspired

them by breaking with the typical routine of school. This creative element is shown in the next samples.

I left of the house. I and Diana down of the car in the town, then we came to school and on the road under of art sewage leave in monster of fourth foot. The monster ran us, I and Diana gaze one light forward of we running toward she and age god. He carried us fly towards the school. I arrived and I told to everyone what occurred. (Angie. SA. "Writing a short story", fourth creative writing activity)

104 Yo me sentí alegre…y feliz escribiendo esta clase de texto porque podía
105 imaginar lo que quisiera y por porque lo que imaginaba era como si fuera
106 verdad. Cuando la profesora explica que hay que escribir uno empieza a
107 imaginarse cosas y uno se ríe de imaginarse cosas y también se ríe de lo que
108 los compañeros se imaginan. (Sandra I, p: 4)

In addition, students were the main characters of their stories. They wrote their stories in first person and the actions happened around them as the next examples show:

I was on the road when find a dinosaur extremely enormous an nasty. The dinosaur was of Jupiter and in the moment superman appear in the sky. Superman was flying and after descend the ground.
Superman lift up the dinosaur and after was flying when pass a aircraft of paper and whistle. When at last I and superman arrive the school, superman say bay, bay boy and I then was asking the autograph.

I was worried and after I looked at them, talk with the teacher and then they giggle.(Yerson. SA. "Writing a short story". Fourth creative writing activity)

378 Bueno, pues… yo creo me gustó ser el personaje principal porque es mi propia
379 historia. Eso me hizo sentir… pues… importante. Fue como una oportunidad de ser

That day
in the patio of my house
the moon splendid
And pink and pretty linght
It is my parents' anniversary
their love is as
the of two adolescents
In August eiting
Was very splendid night
Arounds of roses pinks
I is very happy
Now the count believ
Whe I the see
I is very happy
(Jenifer. SA. "Writing your own song" Second creative writing activity)

380 importante. (Diana. I, p. 13)

In addition to the great influence of television and movies on our students, creative writing activities were employed to express the value of students' relationships with their family. Thus, I could evidence how a letter, a song, or a poem reflected the importance of having a family with whom to share unique and special moments.

> **P**age of life
> **A**chievement in the family
> **R**enewal of their daily experience
> **E**ddy of great decisions with their children
> **N**ever they give into the problems
> **T**hey are big
> **S**acred marriage
> (Camilo. SA. "Writing your own poem". Third creative writing activity)

Creative writing activities encouraged students to express strong feelings about their families. According to this position, "the engagement of feelings is also of considerable importance. When feelings are touched, learners are totally involved in the writing and appear at times to be writing above their expected capability" (Brookes and Grundy, 1991, cited by Rojas, 2005, p: 81).

I found that most of the students' production was characterized by the connection between the extraordinary situations or moments they were able to pull from their own experiences, and the coherence and

the cohesion that a text must have to be readable and understandable by others. Students were interested in expressing their ideas in a clear way.

In the following lines, the second category that emerged from the analysis of data is presented to the reader with supporting evidence from students' samples.

Using discourse elements throughout the body of a text

Bearing in mind that creative writing activities provide a space in which students can

describe fantastical situations, and in which they can learn how to express those through a process, I considered it relevant to take into account writing as a product. In agreement with Brown (1994), it is necessary to establish a balance between process and product. An effective final writing is the result of a writing process.

As I mentioned in the theoretical discussion, discourse competence has to do with coherence and cohesion. The term coherence embodies the "organization of our sentences into a text" (Byrne, 1997, p: 2) and the clarity of its ideas. In regards to cohesion, according to Jurado (1998), it refers to the relationship among elements of a text. In this way, mastery of the writing system includes the ability to use the linguistic resources of the language in order to produce comprehensible texts.

In order to analyze students' written productions in an objective way, I decided to establish a set of criteria in agreement with the findings from the diagnostic test explained above. I focused on comprehensible sentences, the use of connectors, and the following of a thematic thread, because these were the challenges students exhibited when writing. These criteria are framed on the rubric in Chart 2 below. This instrument is designed with the ideas of Mertler (2001), who states, "a rubric is an authentic assessment tool used to measure students' work. It is a scoring guide that seeks to evaluate a student's performance based on the sum of a full range of criteria rather than a single numerical score". (p: 25).

Chart 2. Criteria to evaluate students' written production

	Writing comprehensible sentences	Using appropriate logical connectors	Following a thematic thread
Not a all	There is no clear evidence of comprehensible sentences in the composition.	There is no clear evidence of using linking words.	There is no evidence of the following of a thematic thread in the composition.
Not quite	There are between 1 and 3 comprehensible sentences in the composition.	There is evidence of the use of and as a linking word.	There is evidence of the following of a thematic thread in some parts in the composition.
Achieved level	There are 4 or more comprehensible sentences in the composition.	There is clear evidence of the use of linking words such as and, besides, then, after, for that, because.	There is clear evidence of the following of a thematic thread in the composition.

In order to corroborate the use of discourse elements through student writing, the diagnostic test was followed by a final test (Appendix 2), in which students were asked to describe the part of their town they like the most. I used the same criteria in the final test as I used to analyze students' compositions. The results showed comprehensible sentences, the use of appropriate logical connectors, and the following of a thematic thread, which are all discourse elements used by students in their written production.

After applying the criteria set up in Chart 2, the findings confirmed that this category was characterized by the process in which various linguistic components interact with each other to make students' written product readable and understandable with comprehensible sentences, logical connectors and the following of a thematic thread.

In this analysis, I focused on the third level "Achieved level", determined by the criteria that "there are four or more comprehensible sentences in the composition." According to these results, I could see that students' compositions evidenced more use of comprehensible sentences as the following examples show:

Dear fathers:

Hi, how are you? I'm having a gret time!
Yesterday was jogging by the city and saw a lot of trees, lagoons and there are few streets, It is marvelous.
The cars are like the movie. I am happy thanks
I met a beautiful gir and I am leaving with her. He is Amanda.

Here it is very cold. Wen do you back?
Bye…
I love you a lot.
(Camilo. SA. Writing a letter. First creative writing activity)

The park of Jenesano is very pretty to think. It has a pool circular, which I like because we can wet. The palm trees offer a delicious shadow they move with the wind.
Beside opposed to of the pool there are statues, many earthenwares vessels. It means the historical part of my town.
I like go round the park eating ice cream with my friends and my family. (Erick. SA. FT)

344Estuve atenta a las explicaciones que la profesora nos daba… como vimos
345muchos ejemplos con oraciones que tenían un sujeto, un verbo, y un complemento
346bueno creo que pude entender más. (Diana. I, p.12)

As I mentioned before, the results of the diagnostic test and the final test confirmed students' accomplishment in expressing comprehensible sentences.
The following compositions written by Camilo in the final test evidenced outstanding improvement, both in comprehensible sentences and in the extension of the text. Camilo's contributions allowed me to understand how writing in our classroom has to be a frequent practice in order for our students to become familiar with the vocabulary, phrases and sentences. Camilo was aware of his progress and he felt proud of attaining his writing goals.

I am Samuel Moreno have 22 years I am very famous to be He justice it Bogota Admit

I am idiot by not to helep e mys citizen sometimes;I am tolk, grayhired, good person, amiable I am idiot
My be fond to traivel ei Jenezano e.i to estrik a discourse form Andres Camilo Arias I am stupid.(Camilo. SA. DT)

My favourite place of town is the swimming pool. Is situated in the outside of town; exactly in the Hotel Nonceta.
It is a place peaceable and beautiful. It is surrounded of a fence of shrub. Just by of the swimmingpool there is a field to play soccer.
I feel very happy wen I am there. There there are swings upon of lawn. The paving of the swimmingpool is white, the water is cold but is rich wen is making hot, besides, the water is not heavy. I entertain a lot.(Camilo. SA. FT)

428Me gustó mucho ver como a medida que escribía… lo que escribía se entendía 429más que el otro… (Camilo. I, p.15)

The second discourse element that students utilized in their written production was logical connectors, which refer to the use of links, relationships and hierarchies between statements in order to produce a paragraph. "Connecting words are the words and phrases used to add an idea (such as, also, in addition, furthermore), to show sequence (first, then, after that, next, finally), to show result (so, therefore, as a result, consequently), and to show contrast (but, however, nevertheless, on the other hand)." (Raimes, 1983, p: 53)

This aspect of logical connectors was difficult for students because the main style of exercises used in teaching English writing are primarily "fill-in-the-blank" or writing lists of sentences without any connection. Moreover, students did not know the vocabulary related to linking words as connectors that Raimes (1983) mentions above.

In this analysis, I again focused on the third level, "Achieved level," given by the statement "there is clear evidence of the use of linking words such as *and, besides, then*, *after*, *for that, because*". The following samples evidence the advances students made in the use of connector words:

… I am frighten *and* leave running. I was late, I cam see *because* was dark *and* I feel fear. (Andrea. SA. Writing a short story. Fourth creative writing activity)

I woke up *and* I bath I changue *and then* I breakfast. *Then*, I was in the routa trawell towards school. (Diana. SA. Writing a short story. Fourth creative writing activity)

The climate is vere nice. *Also* take photos *for that* I like to share with my familia. (Diana. SA. Writing a letter. First creative writing activity)

418Pude ver que estas palabras son necesarias como para alargar las ideas y… y es
419decir para unir las oraciones y… asi vamos escribiendo más. El párrafo se ve más 420largo (Camilo. I, p.15)

Throughtout these examples, we see students' attempts to use connectors in their writing. Especially important is the fact that students recognized the importance of using linking words in order to expand their ideas

and to form paragraphs, as Erick mentioned in the interview.

Comparing the diagnostic test with the final test, all students showed the use of different connectors to *and*. All students were placed in "Achieved Level" as Sonia's example shows:

I am Diana García, Am actress, I am 32 years distinguish much peoples, Am Keihole cofiee my brothers, Maicol, Diana, Milena, Mariela, Carolina , Santiago, Daniela, Paola. My fruit prefer is mus apple me to a please keep my figure participant in mus novel passion from gulls did art paper from Norma Elisondo in company from with sister Sara , Gimena Erisondo, my worst Dinora Rosales, The brother reyes juan Oscar y franco, Fernando my worst nightmare. (Sonia. SA. DT)

Jenesano is my town. There is a place *that* I like. This is the farm.
I like *because* there nature, animal, flowers trees, palm. This recreational and tourist. There fisth, llamas, chiguiro, cow *also* there is a river there are gondulas where the person swin *and* is enjoy.
When I go with mys fridens,I feel peacefulness. The sound of the nature is my happy. *For that* I love a lot the nature. I invite the people who go there look after this place *because* it make that Jenesano is a pretty town. (Sonia.SA. FT)

494En el primer escrito no utilice estas palabras porque no sabía que era necesario. Ya
495después empecé a utilizarlas que la profe nos dijo, las pronunciamos y las buscamos

496en el diccionario y la profe nos dio muchos ejemplos; entonces ya las empecé a usar. 497También antes no había escrito oraciones largas y…tampoco párrafos. (Sonia. I, p. 17)

Likewise, students' written production evidenced that they follow a thematic thread, which refers to the sequence of ideas along the text as Jurado (1998) states. Here, the production of more than one idea was necessary to see whether they were in a logical order. Generally a paragraph follows a thematic thread when there are a series of sentences that develop a main idea.

In this analysis, I focused on the statement "there is clear evidence of the following of a thematic thread in the composition" established for "Achieved level". During the application of creative writing activities, I perceived how students made advances to follow a thematic thread in their compositions as the following example illustrates:

I wake up, it was cloudy. I left and it was cold.
I saw the car of cardboard.
I saw batman, he murmured to me, I rau out
I came to my school. I was tired of running.
When I arrived to school, I knocked door.
My classmates looked at me, I looked at them chuckle.
(Erick. SA. Writing a short story. Fourth creative writing activity)

41Me concentré en seguir una sola idea asi que escribí sobre una sola cosa y
42pude seguir un order.(Erick's I)

In regards to following a thematic thread in the diagnostic test and the final test, the

students showed outstanding progress. They were placed in "Achieved Level" as the following samples show:

I am Tatiana de los Rios. I likes to eat chicken, eggs. I am model. I am happy, amiable, responsible and pretty. I am afraid devil, crocodile, lions tiger. I am not afraid Dogs Cats rabit. I dislikes criticize, cook, cry, work. I likes paint, dance, talk, study, play, rest, create and travel I likes that me photograph. I like to smile and hatred to be bored. And me likes to sing. I have a girl and a boy. The girl is 3 year old. And the boy is 5 year old my husband is name is Manolo and this my life. (Angie. SA. DT)

The place that I like of Jenesano is the swimming pool. I like much because its watering is refreshing; the meal is savory; also, I like the shower cause the water is very cold.

The hotel also is very pretty. When go to the swimming pool, I feel very happy like yes whole outside an world magic.
I him recommend to the people that visit Jenesano that enjoy the swimming pool. (Angie. SA. FT)

211Viendo mis escritos me siento feliz de ver como mejoré y,y… ahora veo que expreso
212mejor mis ideas y que puedo escribir mejor un párrafo.
(Angie's I)

It was important to see Angie's success in her composition in terms of following a thematic thread. In her first composition, Angie wrote several ideas one-by-one without any order. For example, she began by writing her name, her favorite foods, her profession, her fears, and then she repeated her preferences. In the last lines, she focused on her family. A possible logical order to better organize the topic could be: name, profession, internal features, family, and likes and dislikes. Angie's second composition evidenced a better exposition of her ideas. First, she introduced the name of the place that she likes. Second, she exposed the reason why she likes it and how she feels when she goes there. Third, she concluded by recommending that the reader visit this place. She mentioned in the interview how she felt about her improvements in her writing. As it has been said before, students revealed meaningful progress in coherence and cohesion.

CONCLUSIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Data gathered by means of students' writings, the final test, and the semi-structured interview, revealed that students made use of strategies to make their text comprehensible. Data also demonstrated that creative writing activities constituted a space of language learning in which students had the opportunity to approach the task of writing in a free way. Planning meaningful creative writing activities helped the teacher to guide students in a more effective manner through the task of writing. In particular, the post-writing activities contributed significantly to students' understanding of some difficulties they had in the diagnostic test and of how to improve their final products. When students corrected their own texts, they became familiar with exploring creative writing (a letter, a song, a poem, or a short story) and

remained interested in expressing special situations from their own experiences, such as feelings, ideas, reactions, and emotions, in a coherent and cohesive way. In this sense, the value of writing practice in the classroom was necessary and indispensable.

In addition, creative writing activities as a meaningful task provided students with opportunities to learn how to communicate in written form and to be read and understood. In other words, students became familiar with the resources needed to give sense to their own world, accounting for a discourse competence in terms of coherence and cohesion. Creative writing activities were a powerful tool for students because they helped them understand how to write comprehensible sentences, to use connectors, and to follow a thematic thread.

In sum, the practice of writing skills must encourage students to express their likes and dislikes, feelings and experiences, but it also must improve the use of the different aspects of the language by means of constant repetition and reinforcement in the classroom.

Another important challenge to discuss is the students' reluctance to write in English. In most cases, students do not like to write in their mother tongue. Thus, writing in a foreign language represents a difficult task, especially when these practices do not begin from early stages. Furthermore, students need a lot of guidance to succeed in the task of writing and this practice must be a continuous process. Public schools assign one hour during primary school and between two and three hours in secondary school per week, which is little time to achieve the goals proposed in any writing process program.

Although writing as a process takes time to be developed, it is a useful tool for students to gain the ability to express their ideas in a coherent whole or text. Students write not only to obtain a more coherent product, but to also become more familiar with their individual learning processes. That is, creative writing activities encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning in terms of writing their own texts and correcting them in order to improve their difficulties when writing. Planning meaningful workshops and following the steps of pre-writing, writing, and post-writing help the teacher to better guide students in this process.

The challenge of involving students in different learning environments is the responsibility of both the teacher and the students. For me, this research reflected my personal practices. When I was preparing to teach a lesson, I asked myself how best to teach the concept. I also became aware of the benefits of taking notes about what occurred during activities in my classroom. In this way, I began to write about my class, to reflect on it, and to correct some mistakes that I myself had made. My experience with 7th graders was the result of taking into account new perspectives that identify writing as a dynamic process.

In regards to my experience along this study, the research and data collection were time consuming and extremely difficult for me, because I did not have a strong research background. However, research experience can be gained simply by means of frequent

practice and interest in exploring challenges and their potential solutions. In this sense, the exercise of establishing a research culture in the classroom must be assumed by teachers and learners as a new educational perspective, in order to build, not only knowledge, but also to utilize people as agents of change.

Finally, this project can serve as a guide for other English teachers looking to involve students in meaningful environments focused on creative writing activities in their classrooms.

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APPENDIX 1. WORKSHOPS FORMAT

COLEGIO TÉCNICO COMERCIAL DE JENESANO
WORKSHOP N. 4

Name: _____
Date: _____

TITLE: Writing a story
GOAL: Invent a story to apologize to
the teacher because you were late for class.

1. PREWRITING ACTIVITIES

DIRECTIONS

- Write about what you did after waking up this morning. Concentrate on details such as routine and setting, but also express how you felt.

  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____

- Think about an unusual, interesting, strange, or funny event or thing that happened to you between your house and school.

  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____

- Write about what you did just before arriving to school. Concentrate on details about how this experience finished and how you felt about it.

  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____

2. WRITING ACTIVITIES

DIRECTIONS

- Imagine you are 20 minutes late for class. The teacher is explaining something to the class when you arrive. What would you do? Invent an unusual, interesting, strange, or funny story to apologize to the teacher.

- Remember:
Some important factors that determine successf
a) The **beginning** should introduce the main cha
   the setting, surroundings, and people using th
b) The **middle** should describe the story events.
c) The **end** should be the conclusion, where and
   the problem is solved, and if it is solved.

3. POSTWRITING ACTIVITIES

DIRECTIONS

- Correct your own mistakes, taking into account the following symbols. These symbols describe the mistakes you have made in your writing.

SM	Subject missing
WS	Wrong Subject
VM	Verb missing
WV	Wrong Verb
CM	Complement missing
WC	Wrong Complement
WO	Word order
WW	Wrong word
WM	Word missing
S	Spelling
C	Connector
SS	Sense ?
WP	Wrong punctuation
PM	Punctuation missing
T	Tense

- Write your story again correcting your mistakes.
- Read your story to your classmates.

APPENDIX 2. FINAL TEST

COLEGIO TÉCNICO COMERCIAL DE JENESANO
FINAL TEST

Date: _____

Objective: to determine the level of improvement in writing skills achieved by 7th- grade students after applying the strategy of creative writing

Directions:

- Choose a place in your town that you like the most.
- Try to write paragraphs imagining that you are describing a scene in your town for an artist to paint.
- Concentrate on factual information (age, size, color, materials), details related to the senses (describing what can be perceived —by sight, sound, smell, touch, taste- to make the scene even more vivid and interesting), and opinions or impressions of the place.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

APPENDIX 3. STUDENTS' WRITING SAMPLES

Wednesday, October 28th 2009

Dear Marcela

I want to tell you all. I am in zoo in Cali. There are a lot of animals like orangutan, flamingo, giraffe, octopus, seal, horse, lion, elephant, monkey, hippopotamus, koala. The climate is pleasant.
I am taking photograph of each thing.
Bye friend, when I return I will show the photos.
I love you.

All the best
Paola

(Paola's composition. Writing a letter.

I was in my house
I was in my house
I was eating a hot dog
I was in my room

I was eating a hot dog
My family
My reading
My room
18th October 2009
At 1:30 pm
I was happy

(Erick's composition. Writing a song.
Workshop 1) Workshop 2)

My favorite place of town is the swimming pool. It is situated in the outside of the town exactly in the hotel Noncetá.
It is a place peaceful and beautiful. It is surrounded of a fence of shrub. Just by of the swimming pool there is a field to pay soccer. I feel very happy wen I am there; there are swings upon of lawn. The paving of the swimming pool is white the water is cold but is rich when it is making hot.
I would like to know to swin well for not to feel fear.

(Camilo's composition. Final test)

I arrive to the school when suddenly I saw the Jonnas Brother going down from airplane and invite me to get on to go Hollywood.

We arrived to a wonderful house, I ate crackers with Hanna Montana and Madona. I was asking one autograph and one photo.

I returned by teletransporter that left me at the door of the school and for that I arrived twenty minutes late.

(Jennifer's composition. Writing a short story.
Workshop 4)

APPENDIX 4. SEMI-STRUCTURED FINAL INTERVIEW

Institución: _____

Fecha de la entrevista: _____

Nombre del entrevistado: _____

Lugar:_____

PROPÓSITO:

Obtener información sobre la experiencia que los estudiantes tuvieron durante el desarrollo de los talleres sobre escritura de textos creativos, así como su desenvolvimiento en los diferentes contextos a través de sus escritos.

1. ¿Qué aspectos de su escritura cree que mejoró con el desarrollo de estas actividades?
2. ¿Cómo fue su desempeño durante el desarrollo de estas actividades?
3. ¿Qué estrategias utilizó para producir sus escritos?
4. ¿Qué estrategias utilizó para que sus escritos fueran comprensibles o coherentes?
5. Durante el ejercicio de escritura de textos creativos, usted estuvo escribiendo acerca de sus experiencias, gustos, familia los cuales hacen parte de su vida diaria y fueron escogidos por usted como los temas preferidos para escribir. Usted tuvo la oportunidad de expresar estos aspectos en composiciones como "Writing a letter","Writing your own poem", and "Writing your own song". ¿Cómo se sintió escribiendo sobre estos aspectos?
6. En composiciones como "Writing a story" usted inventó o se imaginó historias fantásticas; además, vivenció situaciones con personajes extranjeros famosos de la televisión y el cine. ¿Qué sensación experimentó escribiendo esta clase de texto? Y ¿Qué estrategias utilizó para que este texto fuera comprensible?
7. Durante el ejercicio de estos talleres de escritura creativa, usted desarrolló diferentes pasos para llegar a su composición final; esto es pre-writing, writing and post-writing activities. ¿De qué manera este proceso le ayudó a expresar sus pensamientos y sus propias ideas?
8. De igual manera cada taller de escritura creativa se enfocó en un tema; así, el primer taller se desarrolló en el contexto de "On vacation"; el segundo, ""Pleasant and unpleasant experience; el tercero, "Likes and dislikes"; el cuarto, "Apologizing for being late for class" y el quinto sobre "The place of your town you like the most" ¿De qué manera estos contextos le permitieron mejorar su escritura?
9. ¿Qué aspectos y habilidades fortaleció en usted el ejercicio de escribir?

APPENDIX 12. INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION SAMPLES

47 Estos contextos me ayudaron pues eran temas que uno se imaginaba y creaba
48 en la mente, eran fáciles y muy sencillos para escribir y así esto a uno se le facilitaba
49 pues era el tema que uno quisiera no el que le dieran.
(Yerson's voice, p.1)

73 Mi desempeño fue muy agradable aunque algunas
74 veces no entendía palabras o no tenia que
75 escribir y me tocaba estar buscando en el diccionario
76 pero después de estas actividades ya no necesitaba
77 estar preguntando o buscando tanto, porque ya entendía
78 mucho mejor.
(Sandra's voice, p.3)

354 Poner cuidado en la explicación y preguntarle
355 a la profesor y tratando de dar sentido al texto
(Diana's voice, p. 12)

34 Emoción, porque al imaginarse esta historia a uno le da mucha alegría y a veces
35 hasta risa pues todo es inventado. Las estrategias que usé, fue imaginar bastante
36 y escribir cosas que tuvieran sentido y no escribir por escribir.
(Yerson's voice, p.2)

476 Primero que todo a mi me gusto mucho los
477 talleres que la profesora no hizo ya que
478 he mejorado mi escritura y en la expresión,
479 en ordenar las palabras y no escribir tal como uno piensa
(Camilo's voice, p.16)