

Creative Writing in Pairs: Pedagogic Possibilities in Japanese University EFL Classes

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I Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) in Japanese Universities has particular difficulties which TEFL in off-campus commercial language schools does not. One of the difficulties comes from the fact that in most of the universities in Japan English is compulsory, and not only students who enjoy learning English but also those who do not like English have to attend the classes. They lack motivation and tend to be inattentive, or only sufficiently attentive to pass the exam and get the credit. Secondly, in contrast to language schools where it is rather easy and not unusual to divide students into classes according to their levels, Japanese universities usually teach various levels of students in the same class. Even when all the students have passed the entrance examination and are expected to be above a certain level, the university entrance English examinations usually focus on such aspects as grammar or reading comprehension, and the students' communicative abilities are often quite varied. Because of this it is often difficult for the teacher to fix the target or level of teaching. The lesson can be too easy for some students when the teacher tries to have the less advanced students understand well, or too difficult for some others when the teacher makes it challenging enough for the more advanced students. Thirdly, Japanese students tend to be afraid of making mistakes in class, especially in front of other students, and hesitate to be active. This may partly be because Japanese students easily feel ashamed of making mistakes and of being corrected publicly in front of their peers, but also because they are more anxious about their grade points than they are about making real prog-

ress in English ability and would rather avoid making any mistake than make a mistake and get corrected. Rather than taking a risk, they tend to choose the negatively safe way of not answering or speaking up at all. This nervousness seems to hinder their development, since it keeps them from absorbing input: as Lightbown and Spada (2006), referring to Krashen's *affective filter hypothesis* (Krashen & Terrell 1998, pp. 37–39), remark, a learner who is in an adverse state of mind or emotion such as being tense, anxious, or bored may “filter out” input and make it unavailable for language acquisition (Lightbown & Spada 2006, p. 37). It also hinders the students from activating the grammatical knowledge and vocabulary that they once learned in their high-school days. Fourthly, classes in Japanese universities usually meet only once a week, and have only 28 to 30 weeks a year including an orientation and two end-term examination weeks. Teachers have to develop their students' ability within those limitations.

In this article, I shall propose creative writing in pairs or groups as an effective solution of the difficulties above. Potential advantages of such activities would include involving the students in active participation in learning and benefiting the less advanced and the more advanced students simultaneously; and if we use such Internet tools as e-mail or web-conferencing software, it would be possible to have students continue the activity throughout the week, instead of only in the once-a-week class.

I shall first consider what advantages creative writing in Japanese TEFL classes might have to solve the above-mentioned problems, and secondly I shall report on an experimental creative activity in an actual class which explored the viability, problems and advantages of such classroom work.

II Advantages of Creative Writing in Japanese EFL Classes

1. From Passive to Active Learning

As Rossiter points out, learners in Japanese universities are often instructed to practise “the standard rhetorical patterns of English academic, or quasi-academic, writing” (1997, p. 27). This is a product-oriented tradition, in which a teaching sequence might

begin with the analysis of a model text as an example of the target rhetorical pattern, and then continue with a series of exercises to practise that pattern. This teaching is given in a controlled way, likely to reduce the students to being passive recipients. For example, they may only follow “a set of easily learnable and teachable rules” (1997, p. 27) to produce well-formed examples of paragraphs of narrative, comparison, description of cause and effect, etc.

This way of teaching is in line with what Lightbown and Spada call the “get it right from the beginning” method, which is a structure-based approach where the focus is put on correctness from the beginning. This approach has been criticised on the ground that language is not learned by the gradual accumulation of one item after another, that the motivation of learners is often stifled by insistence on correctness at the earliest stages of second language learning, and that it is better to encourage learners to develop fluency before accuracy (Lightbown & Spada 2006, p. 140). Acceptance of such criticisms tends to lend support to communicative approaches, in which errors are regarded as natural and necessary features of the process of language acquisition.

It is now largely agreed that although grammatical correctness is important, the negative effect of too much stress on accuracy is often destructive (Lightbown & Spada 2006, pp. 143 & 190). This seems especially true in the case of those learners who do not like English, or who are far less advanced than their classmates. In such cases, it would be helpful to encourage the learners to speak or write as much as they can, to communicate anyway even though in grammatically broken English, and to taste the joy of being able to communicate in English. The feeling, “I can communicate in English, even though I make errors,” will motivate them to learn English further, and will eventually lead to a reduction of grammatical errors and mistakes. To give them tasks which will make them active and to give them the joy of using English is more important than to give them accuracy-oriented, often boring, exercises such as pattern practice. With less motivated students, form-oriented practices hardly work well. I have often noticed that in doing grammatical exercises, such students do not mind if they do not understand the meaning of the sentences or the words used in the exercises. For instance, in an

exercise to make given adjectives, e.g. “tidy” or “far”, into comparatives, they think they have done well enough if they can write “tidier” or “further” correctly, even if they do not understand the meaning of “tidy” or “far”. Often, they do not care about the pronunciation, either. The question asks them for the form “tidier” and they do not feel it necessary to know whether it should be pronounced [tɪdiə] or [táidiə]. In such cases, real acquisition of English is hard to expect. It is necessary to make the learners realize that language consists of form, content and sound, not only one of these. To do so, it would be most efficient to involve them in an actual activity of *using* the language, not in *studying about* the language.

2. The Joy of Writing and Some Possibilities of Creative Writing

Two of the largest motivations to learn English are necessity and joy. Anyone would settle down to learn English seriously if he/she really needed it in his/her career, or when thrown into an environment where English is the only language that can be used for communication. However, in many cases, students who do not like English seem to see little necessity to learn it. They come to class just for a grade. For such students, offering fluency-oriented tasks which are enjoyable may be the best, if not the only, viable approach. Fluency-oriented tasks force the students to be meaning-conscious, and make them use the language as the language should be used, as a tool of communication which has form and meaning.

There are at least four possible kinds of fluency-oriented activities that I think are useful in university writing classes. One is journal writing, and the others are more creative sorts of writing, that is, writing poetry, stories and imaginary conversations.

The first one, journal writing, is suitable for individual practice. Although an exclusive emphasis on journal writing might possibly restrict the learners’ experience of other genres of writing, as Rossiter comments, actually the learners often write about various kinds of things, such as politics, the language course itself, as well as their personal lives. In journal writing, however, if the teacher demands accuracy, it might discourage the learners (1997, pp. 28–29).

Whereas journal writing usually involves only reporting and commenting, creative writing involves invention and the use

of imagination, and thus is more satisfying and intrinsically pleasurable. Cook (2000) suggests that imaginative creative activities come from “a general human need”. Human beings cannot do without them, whether they take the form of make-believe games, highbrow literary fiction, soap operas or even, in a puritan society, “improving” moral fictions. Thus, Cook finds that “the presence of language play [. . .] seems to remain fairly consistent” (p. 123) in all human societies. Creative writing, as well as reading what has been created by themselves and their classmates, may therefore be attractive enough to engage the students’ attention.

Poetry, the second of alternatives I have mentioned above, is a typically creative mode of writing. As Rossiter remarks, it can be more efficient than journal writing as a way of simultaneously promoting “both a powerful focus on intended meanings *and* an engagement with linguistic form” (1997, p. 29). He presents a case study in which students are given some templates of poetry, with blanks to fill in. One example is:

One fine day in the middle of _____
 Two _____ men got up to fight.
 _____ they faced each other,
 Drew their _____ and shot each other.[. . .]

Typically, the students filled these gaps with “summer”, “strong”, “angrily”, and “guns”, which are all logically appropriate. However, the original poem in fact runs, “One fine day in the middle of the night/ Two dead men got up to fight./ Back to back they faced each other/ Drew their swords and shot each other [. . .]” (p. 39). The students are thus shown how in poetry language can be used to make an “impossible story.” The students are then told to make their “impossible story,” employing their imagination freely, first in groups, and then working individually to polish and extend and enrich the group draft to make their own personal variant of it (p. 42). After submitting their final versions, the students get feedback from the teacher.

The gap-fill exercise is intended to be a “consciousness-raising” exercise, to bring the students to notice “a formal linguistic principle at work in a text which is simultaneously being processed in terms of meaning” (p. 41). Yet more than that, accord-

ing to Rossiter's survey, the students found the exercise not only useful but also enjoyable. Of the total of 34 students, the numbers of those who found the class enjoyable and useful or not are as follows:

	enjoyable/ useful	fairy enjoyable/ useful	so-so	not very enjoyable/ not useful	not enjoyable/ not useful	no answer
Is it enjoyable?	16 (47%)	15 (44%)	2 (6%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Is it useful?	13 (38%)	10 (29%)	8 (24%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	2 (6%)

Table 1: *Students' response to creative writing exercises (Rossiter, 1998)*

This shows that most of the students found the class enjoyable and useful (1998, p. 71).

Rossiter has shown how poetry can involve students in the active task of writing while using their imaginations and thinking in English. He has also shown poetry is very effective in arousing the students' verbal consciousness. Before reading his article, I had thought poetry writing would be too difficult for Japanese students, for, in Japan, where the poetry reading tradition is not so strong as in England, and where nursery rhymes are not so popular as they are in England, students might not be familiar with the literary genre of poetry at all. However, he has shown that students can very actively and successfully participate in poetry writing. Now poetry seems to me an especially effective way to have students think in English, because poetry is basically untranslatable, with its meaning, sound and images connected together inseparably.

The second kind of creative writing is story writing. Since this involves reading in the process of revision and proof-reading, story writing practises both writing and reading. Also, it may be especially effective with those learners who are hindered by a high affective filter. Smith (1994) has found that story writing works as an efficient means to help students who have problems in reading in their first language. Her approach is to encourage the child to make a story and tell it to her; she transcribes it exactly as the child tells it, without changing even a word even when there are grammatical mistakes or obvious

inconsistencies, and then has the child read the printed-out story by him/herself. To help the child to make a story, pictures or photos can be used. She reports that even those children who find it hard to read, for various reasons, can read their own story as a text and understand it without any problem. For example, those who have previously been entirely passive and have refused to engage with any text are often interested in their own text and enjoy reading it. Those who have been afraid of taking the risk of failing in ordinary school reading exercises can read their own text in a positive and safe way, because they are confident that they know it and understand it well (Smith, pp. 38; 91–95).

Smith has found that generally young children clearly understand the process of turning their own ideas and stories into books for themselves and for other children to read. Although in the case of less successful children, who have problems with reading and writing, writing is slow and painful, once someone has written down their story, they are able to read it critically and revise it so as to make it a better story.

Although Smith's practice was originally designed for children whose first language is English, her method may be used in EFL classes. Japanese EFL students often have difficulty in reading for the same reason as Smith's children, such as the fear of taking risks in school reading exercises, or a passivity that keeps them from getting involved in reading. For such students, writing and reading their own story may lead to a breakthrough. If we modify her method to make it appropriate to classroom teaching where instruction is given to a number of students together, it may be a very efficient way of teaching in high schools or universities. For example, the transcription can be done not by the teacher but by another student, so that it gives the transcribing students an opportunity for listening and writing practice. Also, it would give them an opportunity for negotiation of meaning, as well as an opportunity to practise speaking. Story writing can thus be an ideal way of developing all the four skills.

The final possibility is drama, or short conversation skits. This could be employed in speaking classes, too, as writing down imaginary conversations, and then performing them, will provide the students with both writing and speaking practice.

Besides, many students, even when they do not like to *study* English, now seem to be interested in English conversation, and for such students, conversation skit writing will be motivating.

III Pair and Group Work

As Harmer (2001) points out, pair- and group-work learning has several advantages over individualised learning, though it also has possible disadvantages. He says pair work “dramatically increases the amount of talking for individual students.” It encourages students to work independently without being told what to do by the teacher, “thus promoting learner independence.” It also promotes cooperation and makes the classroom a more relaxed and friendly place, allowing the students “to share responsibility rather than having to bear the whole weight themselves” (p. 116). He recognizes these advantages also in group activities, suggesting that group work encourages even “broader skills of cooperation and negotiation” than pair work (p. 117), though groups can be less easy to organise than pairs (p. 116 & 118).

Similarly, Carson and Nelson (1994) comment that the merit of collaborative learning is that it allows students “to be mutually supportive, to share responsibility for thinking by jointly managing argument construction, to model and learn different thinking strategies, and to benefit from the shared expertise of the group” (p. 18). They also suggest that group collaboration is appropriate for Japanese students who have been brought up in schools where group (“*han*”) participation is encouraged (p. 21).

In addition to these, I expect some further advantages, that is, students may benefit from having their mistakes corrected by other students in the course of working together; they may learn to listen or read critically (in a good sense) what their peers say or write in order to import the good parts into their shared work, having made some corrections or modifications if necessary.

There may some anxiety on the part of instructors that elementary students might make too many errors and mistakes in their speech if left talking with their peers, and that they may copy each other’s mistakes and develop bad habits, but Lightbown and Spada (2006) have reported that the results of their research show that “learners do not produce any more errors in

their speech when talking to learners at similar levels of proficiency than they do when speaking to learners at more advanced levels or to native speakers" (p. 191). Therefore, we can expect only positive effects of the students' talking and thinking together about their shared work. Their critical reading of each other's writing, negotiation of meaning, and giving and receiving of advice in building up a piece of work can be a good exercise in meaningful communication, as well as social training. It has also been reported that peer feedback can work effectively, especially when peer review training has been given in advance (Min 2006, p. 126; Berg 1999, pp. 227–230; ALESS 2009), and such training would also work as a preparation for any group writing in the process of which students will necessarily have to make comments on or point out mistakes in each other's work. Another advantage of pair writing activities in which students read other students' writing is that students are able to experience different styles and choices of vocabulary and grammar from their own (ALESS 2009).

There are some possible problems that may hinder the success of pair or group activities, but they can be solved if properly dealt with. When one of the pair or group is taking a dominant role, the collaboration will not work well, for the other member(s) will either be unwilling to collaborate or will just take a subservient role (Watanabe & Swain 2007, p. 122). Or, if no one wants to break the ice and every one waits for others to speak—as is often the case in Japanese classrooms—the collaborative work will not start smoothly. Too much noisiness and irrelevant chatting, on the other hand, is another possible problem. Also, students may hesitate to make any critical remarks on their peer students' writing even when necessary, for fear of its sounding harsh and spoiling the personal relationship with them (Carson & Nelson 1994, p. 27).

In order to avoid these problems, the teacher should constantly encourage every member of the group or each of the pair to actively participate in the task. It is also necessary to make the students understand that critical feedback is different from personal attack, and that it is a useful way of improving their work, as well as being profitable to both members of the pair in terms of making progress in their English ability.

IV Using the Internet

In recent years, such Internet tools as online document or chat sites have become available. This has made it possible for students to do collaborative tasks for homework. They can do them wherever they can e-mail or access the Internet. Also, as many college students now enjoy e-mailing and chatting over the Internet, building up a story or writing a skit together by means of these will also be enjoyable for them. Another advantage of using the Internet is that it would enable students to continue their learning throughout the week, instead of just attending class once a week, as is the case in most university classes in Japan. Research by DiGiovanni & Nagaswami (2001) on the effectiveness of computer-mediated peer review in a language laboratory setting compared to traditional face-to-face peer review, has shown advantages of computer-mediated pair work. For example, it keeps students on task, teachers can monitor students' interaction much more closely than in face-to-face peer review, and students need not depend on their memory to revise their drafts based on their peers' oral comments (p. 268). As to the feelings of the students, some preferred and found it easier to say what they wanted to say face-to-face, and some found it easier to do so through use of computers. In addition, some students found the computer-mediated system inconvenient because they had to be in the language laboratory to use it and they did not have enough time to work on the task there.

DiGiovanni and Nagaswami's research took place nine years ago, when the only available network software for them was *Norton Textra Connect* (1996), which was designed for classroom use (DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, p. 265). Since that time, Internet communication tools have radically advanced and have become much easier and quicker to use, and it is now possible to do computer-mediated exercises outside the classroom by using the Internet. On the other hand, the fact that some students prefer face-to-face peer review to online peer review is not to be neglected in thinking of employing any online pair work. Online pair work is probably most effective when combined with in-class pair work, with its face-to-face conversational discussion.

V Action Research: Aims and Method

In order to know how peer activities in creative writing might work in actual EFL classes in Japanese universities, I experimentally gave my students a task. This was action research in the sense defined by Nunan (1992): “A form of self-reflective inquiry carried out by practitioners, aimed at solving problems, improving practice, or enhancing understanding” (p. 229). Lightbown and Spada (2006) remark that one of the characteristics of action research is that “goals and questions are local and specific to the teacher’s own teaching environment” (p. 195). In my case, the main problems that I wanted to address were the students’ hesitation to write in English, their lack of motivation, and their passivity in learning. I also wanted to see how my students would enjoy a creative activity, especially in pairs, and whether this activity would motivate them to keep communicating in English outside of class, so that I could employ similar activities in my classes in future, adding some adjustments where necessary.

Therefore, this research did not aim to find a universal truth about English acquisition, nor to point out any problems or advantages which would be found when teaching students at any proficiency level. However, I hope this study may be able to contribute in some way to those teachers who teach about the same level of students in environments similar to mine.

The task I gave my students was as follows. I gave it to them as a handout, then translated it for them sentence by sentence and also explained what to do in Japanese, to make sure that they should correctly understand what to do.

Activity

Imagine a salesperson working in a department store. One day a UFO lands on the rooftop of the shop and a creature from a far-away planet comes out. The creature says he wants to buy a souvenir for his wife. What should the salesperson recommend? Make up a conversation between the salesperson and the man from the planet. Perhaps the salesperson will have to explain about the thing he or she recommends, for most things on the earth must be new to him. When you are writing the dialogue, do not have the man buy the first thing recommended. Think of some reason why he thinks it is unsuitable for his wife; think of

the possible differences in climate, customs, inhabitants, etc. between the earth and the other planet. For instance, if the salesperson suggests a pretty hat, explaining it is for a woman to wear on her head, he might say, "Well, my wife is always walking upside down, on her head and hands, not on two legs like you earth people, so it would be impossible for her to wear a hat on top of head."

If you like, you may introduce some other customer who asks questions about the strange creature. What do you do in that situation?

Make the dialogue as funny and witty as possible. Don't try to be too realistic. Please discuss and collaborate with your pair in this class, and then continue the work on the Internet, using Google Docs or e-mail. Next week we shall have about 30 minutes to complete the work before I ask you to submit the final version of your dialogue.¹

The number of the students who attended the day when I gave them this task and submitted what they had written the next week was 37, that is, 17 pairs and a group of 3. The level of these students' English ability, in reading as well as in writing, is quite low. Many of them have failed to master the elementary grammar that is taught in junior and senior high schools, and do not even know, for example, how to make *wh-* questions, or comparatives and superlatives. Such mistakes as "Are you go to school?" or "Will you coming tomorrow?" are very common among them. Although there are writing exercises in their text book, more than half the students just skip them, giving up from the outset, or just wait for some other students to write the answer on the whiteboard, and then copy it. Some of the students frankly say, "I cannot write English!" or "I am poor at English," or worse still, "I don't like English." Many of them could not understand the meaning of the assignment itself without my explanation in Japanese.

When I was preparing and making plans for the assignment I expected as a possible difficulty the students' inability to handle Internet communication tools. I also expected the possibility that some of the students would not have access to the Internet at home, and thought of asking them to use the university computers in the open IT rooms. When it came to carrying out the

action research, the actual problem that occurred, however, was different: for a technical reason, Google Docs was not available on the university computers for the students to use in my class on the day when I wanted to use it for the assignment. This forced me to change the plan and I asked the students to use e-mail to work with their partner during the week between the two classes.

After the students submitted the assignment, I made a questionnaire (consisting of two sheets) and asked them how they found the activity and how they had done it. Thirty-seven students answered the first sheet of the questionnaire, and 30 students answered the second sheet, but not all of them answered all the questions. The questionnaire was given in Japanese to make it easy to understand.

VI Results and Discussion

The results of the action research were a mixture of what I had expected and what I had not. One of the results that came up to my expectation was that the students made up quite enjoyable and witty conversations, though obviously many of them were having difficulty in expressing their ideas in English. Of the 18 skits handed in, 8 have a fairly well-made story line, consisting of the speaker offering and explaining some item, the man from the other planet declining it with some reason, and the salesperson's second offer, which is accepted by the man. For example, one pair has the salesperson offer a pair of glasses, which the man declines because his wife has excellent eyesight. This salesperson then offers some food, but it is also rejected because earthen food might cause an allergy. The third thing that is offered is a camera, which is at last approved and taken. In a conversation by another pair, rice cake, or *mochi*, is offered, but with a warning that it might cause suffocation, in which case the best cure is to use a vacuum cleaner to clear the throat. Another pair created a narrative rather than just a dialogue:

. . . Saleswoman said again.
 "Then, how about the bicycle? This is a vehicle".
 The space alien it was said,
 "Please give this. This is good".

And flew by bicycle.
The moon was beautiful.

This is a poetic and visually impressive ending, with the man on a bicycle flying away under or toward the moon, and shows the authors' creativity and active involvement in writing.

Another result which matched my expectation was that the students largely enjoyed and welcomed this pair activity. Their enjoyment showed itself in the wit and liveliness of their writing, as well as being expressed in the questionnaire (see Tables 2 and 3 below). Significantly, I found that all the students in the class more or less got involved in the activity, and that none of them gave up without trying.

There were disappointing results, too, which I had not expected but actually should have predicted: for one thing, most students started thinking of the story in Japanese, writing a complete scenario in Japanese, and then translated it into English. Many of them used a Japanese-English translation web-site, and, if I had not I stopped them, they would have continued to depend on machine translation. Moreover, as far as I saw in the class, all the students used Japanese in their discussion, and thus the pair activity did not work as conversation practice. Also, most of the students spent only a little time on the assignment during the week, and did not use e-mail for it. Even before the end of the first class, more than a few pairs said they had finished the assignment, so I needed to repeat the request to try to improve their draft over the week by using e-mail or meeting with their partner somewhere. Nevertheless, it was obvious that a number of them wanted to finish everything in the classroom itself, rather than taking the task home and spending time on it there. On the other hand, according to their answers to the questionnaire, four students spent more than three hours at home on the assignment at home, though three of them used e-mail only "a little". The fourth student answered, "used e-mail much," but that was to divide up the task, after which each of the pair wrote their allotted part individually at home. It seems that study at home is easier to do individually, and that the cooperative part of work is easier to do face-to-face in the classroom rather than by e-mail—and even when the students use e-mail, the discussion is likely to be done in Japanese. It also became obvious that

it is difficult to motivate all, or even most, of the students to spend their “free” time, i.e., the time outside of class, to improve the assignment as much as possible, rather than just to “finish” it. The attempt to have the students keep practising English through this task, therefore, turned out to be not very successful, though this is not to say that it was totally unsuccessful—some of the students, after all, seemed to spend some time over the task, as the conversations which they handed in and their answers to the feedback questionnaire indicated.

The questions and answer data are as follows (percentages have been rounded).

	Very	fairly	so-so	not very	not at all	no answer
1. Did you find this activity useful?	5 (14%)	20 (54%)	8 (21%)	1 (3%)	2 (5%)	1 (3%)
2. Did you enjoy this activity?	8 (21%)	12 (32%)	12 (32%)	2 (5%)	2 (5%)	1 (3%)
3. Do you want to do such activity more often in the class?	10 (27%)	14 (37%)	8 (21%)	4 (11%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
4. Do you find group/pair work useful?	9 (24%)	14 (37%)	10 (27%)	2 (5%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
5. If you answered question 4 by saying “useful” or “rather useful”, please circle the reason. (You can circle more than one.)	Pair/group work is more enjoyable than studying alone. 13 (35%) It is helpful to discuss with friends. 9 (24%) Pair/group work stimulates me to learn English. 4 (11%) It is helpful to get errors and mistakes pointed out by a peer. 4 (11%) It is enjoyable to use the Internet. 8 (21%) It is helpful to be able to continue practising English outside of class. 2 (5%) Other reason 0 (0%)					
6. If you answered question 4 by saying “not very useful” or not at all useful”, please circle the reason. (You can circle more than one.)	It is more enjoyable to study alone. 1 (3%) Pair/group work does not help studying and seems to be waste of time. 3 (8%) Pair/group work does not stimulate me to learn English. 1 (3%) It is unpleasant to have errors and mistakes pointed out by a peer. 1 (3%) It is not enjoyable to use the Internet. 2 (5%) I do not want to study English outside of class. 1 (3%) Other reason 0 (0%)					
7. Are you interested in using the Internet in learning English?	13 (35%)	12 (32%)	10 (27%)	2 (5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
8. Do you use English routinely in your daily life on the Internet or to access news media?	3 (8%)	8 (21%)	9 (24%)	8 (21%)	9 (24%)	0 (0%)

9. Do you want to be able to use English on the Internet or to access news media?	8 (21%)	13 (35%)	6 (16%)	6 (16%)	3 (8%)	1 (3%)
10. Are you willing to make an effort to learn to use English on the Internet or to access new media?	2 (5%)	18 (49%)	7 (19%)	8 (21%)	2 (5%)	0 (0%)

Table 2: Questionnaire Sheet No. 1. (Answered by 37 students)

11. How much time did you spend at home for this assignment?	less than 1 hour 19 (63%)	1-2 hours 4 (13%)	2-3 hours 3 (10%)	more than 3 hours 4 (13%)	no answer 0 (0%)
12. Did you use e-mail for it during the week?	not at all 11 (37%)	a little 16 (53%)	much 3 (10%)	no answer 0 (0%)	
13. Where and how did you do the assignment during the week? (Write either in English or in Japanese.)	At home. 5 (16%) In the class and school. 7 (23%) At school and home by mail. 2 (7%) In the class and at home: having written an outline in Japanese in the class, translated each part (one is to translate the words of the salesperson, and the other, the words of the man from the planet) at home. 1 (3%) By e-mail to allot the roles and individually at home to finish. 1 (3%) By discussion at school in PC room. 3 (10%)				11 (37%)

Table 3: Questionnaire Sheet No. 2 (Answered by 30 students)

The results of this questionnaire show that more than half of the students enjoyed this activity, and less than 10% of them either did not much or at all enjoy it. More than 60% of them either found this activity useful or fairly useful, and only 3 students out of 37 found it either not very or not at all useful. It can also be seen that more than two-thirds of the students found group work useful, and that the largest reason for this was the pleasure of studying together. A quarter of them found it helpful to discuss with friends.

Some results are hard to interpret. For instance, the student who answered question 6 by saying, "Pair/group work does not stimulate me to learn English" and "I do not want to study English outside of class," answered questions 7 to 9 by choosing "very much," and question 10 by saying "so so." This might mean that students might like to use or develop their skills in

English, but if it comes to doing an assignment, or actually studying, they do not feel like doing it.

Another result, in this case advantageous, was that, because this assignment stimulated the students to write adventurously rather than merely attempting to avoid mistakes, the exercise was very effective in revealing weak points of their writing, in terms of either grammar or usage. The sentence quoted above, "The space alien it was said," is one example. The students may have confused two sentences: "The space alien said," and "It was said." I have noticed that some of my students cannot distinguish passive from active sentences in reading, and this research shows that this is also the case in a simple writing exercise.

On this occasion, peer review, which I had expected to be done as a natural part of the collaborative work, did not work well. Many simple grammatical mistakes, such as those we have seen above, were uncorrected and handed in as they were. This may have been partly because peer review training had not been given beforehand, partly because of the students' lack of fundamental grammatical ability, and partly because the students did not spend enough time in collaboration. In addition, using e-mail in the first pair work they had ever done may have been too much, for it was doing two new things together. For students who are not used to pair work, it would be easier to start face-to-face in class, and then, when they have got accustomed to it, move on to doing it over the Internet or by e-mail.

VII Conclusion

In Japan, creative writing activities have not been widely used, and even less in the form of pair or group work. However, the various advantages of creative writing and pair work discussed in this paper suggest that it may be useful to do them more often in the classroom. Such activities, if successfully done, would be both enjoyable and fruitful for the students in that they stimulate their creativity and lead them to exchange ideas frankly in an attempt to improve their work. My small piece of action research has shown that even those students who tend to be very passive in the way that they approach writing assignments can welcome a creative writing activity done as pair-work exercise, regardless of their level of English. Today, we may also be able to utilize the

Internet to involve the students more actively and more continuously in writing, although the actual condition of Japanese university language laboratory classrooms may still not be ready for this yet. Thus, although my research has shown some problems which need to be overcome, it also suggests that if we can solve those problems, we can use creative writing in Japanese EFL classes as an effective and enjoyable way of learning.

Note

1. I got the basic idea for this activity from Rossiter's "the first Martian to visit Earth," (1998, p. 63), where students are asked to explain to another Martian about activities or things on the earth which are unknown on Mars

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