

## “From now on, I am Fearless” Portraying Students’ Learning Process in Creative Writing Class through their Poems

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### Abstract

This study aims to portray how students reflect their learning process in a creative writing course through their poems. Forty-seven students of an English Literature Department in a private university in Semarang participated in this study. The course mainly covered the short story and poetry writing. Poetry writing was started in the second half of the semester. In this study, the students were required to write a learning reflection to look back at the process they had been through. Employing Hanauer’s meaningful literacy concept (2012), the researchers analyzed how students reflected their learning process in their poems. It is argued that language learning should enable students to use language in a way that is more meaningful and relevant to their personal experiences. In terms of reflection, it is believed that by deliberately looking back at their learning process students can objectively evaluate, understand and make sense of their journey. This study found four major themes in the students’ reflective poems namely altered perspective, students’ struggle, increased self-assurance, and students’ future expectations. In conclusion, language learning should embrace meaningful literacy in which students should be allowed to deliver their personal and meaningful expressions, in this case by writing poetry.

**Keywords:** Meaningful Literacy, Creative Writing, Poetry

### INTRODUCTION

Creative writing has recently gained attention in Higher Education language learning classes. Whether it is taught as an independent course or integrated into language learning classes, creative writing has been recognized for its potential to enhance students' learning.

A study by Pawliczak (2015) suggests that creative writing can improve students' writing skills. It can also help students develop confidence in their writing abilities, as noted by Cronin (2019). Notably, it has been found to improve academic writing skills (Senel, 2018; Venuta, 2020).

In addition, Alkhaldi (2023) found that creative writing facilitates students in English for Specific Purposes classes while (Traina, 2021) argued that it can enhance reading comprehension and appreciation for literature. Furthermore, creative writing has been found to cultivate creativity in students (Reynolds et al., 2022.). Specifically at the Higher Education level, creative writing benefits students' personal development and their language learning (Kasrabowo et al., 2021). Overall, the incorporation of creative writing in language learning classes is a promising approach to enriching students' learning experiences.

Despite the above opportunities, challenges that come with teaching creative writing, such as the need for effective learning models (Sari et al., 2020), problems with course materials, teacher instructions, and student motivation (Nugraha & Listyani, 2021), and different perceptions of creative writing among students (Pratiwi, 2019) need to be addressed. These challenges also include issues with grammar and vocabulary (Mansoor, 2010) as well as a lack of time and training (Elsharazly, 2020).

Somehow teachers should seize the opportunity to overcome those challenges by implementing effective strategies to teach creative writing. For instance, teachers can incorporate technology and multimedia tools into teaching materials to help motivate students and enhance their learning experiences. Additionally, providing students with frequent feedback and opportunities for peer review can help to address grammar and vocabulary challenges. Moreover, creating a positive learning environment that encourages experimentation and risk-taking can help students overcome their reluctance to engage with creative writing. With these strategies in place, teachers can transform the challenges of teaching creative writing into opportunities for growth and development for their students.

Creative writing, including poetry and memoirs, has proven to be a versatile tool beyond language learning, as demonstrated by its widespread use in various fields. In the social work profession, it has been used to facilitate students' reflection on their experiences, as well as to share their insights through poetry and

journal writing (Furman et al., 2008). Creative writing has also provided a means for individuals to express their traumatic experiences and emotions, as demonstrated by Iida, (2016), in which earthquake survivors used poetry as a therapeutic outlet. Additionally, creative writing can be used to promote positive attitudes toward one's own culture (Rosenhan & Galloway, 2019). In the nursing education context, creative writing can be utilized to develop student's critical thinking skills (Deliligka & Caldglou, 2022). Furthermore, creative writing has emerged as a powerful tool for mental health therapy, as evidenced by its use Mundy et al. (2022), and Rom et al. (2022). By offering a safe and creative outlet for individuals to express their thoughts and emotions, creative writing has the potential to positively impact individuals across a wide range of disciplines and professions.

Poetry is a well-known product of creative writing, and its potential use in language learning should not be overlooked. When students write poetry, they are using the language they are learning, which can be a valuable tool for language acquisition. Of course, this depends on the level of the students and their ability to use correct grammar and appropriate vocabulary. However, it is important to recognize that language learning should not only focus on these technical aspects.

Introducing the concept of meaningful literacy Hanauer (2012) argued that language learning should enable learners to engage in personal, contextualized, and meaningful activities. Thus, the goal of language learning should be to facilitate personal and meaningful expressions. This approach can improve not only language proficiency but also help learners develop a deeper understanding of the language and culture they are studying. By allowing learners to express themselves in a meaningful way, language learning can become a more engaging and rewarding experience for students. Poetry can play an important role in achieving this goal, as it allows learners to use language creatively and express themselves in a way that is both personal and meaningful.

Hanauer (2012) is a prominent expert in the field of poetry writing as a classroom methodology for ESL/EFL learners. He cited Kramsch (2006) and Widdowson (1998), who

stated that language teaching had become dehumanized and decontextualized. This means that learners are not given enough opportunities to use language in a meaningful way. Hanauer's concept of utilizing poetry writing in language classrooms addresses this issue by providing learners with a more personal and contextualized approach to language learning. By engaging learners in the creative process of writing poetry, they can use language in a way that is more meaningful and relevant to their personal experiences. This not only enhances their language proficiency but also fosters a deeper appreciation for the language and culture they are studying. By providing learners with a more engaging and relevant language learning experience, the use of poetry writing in ESL/EFL classrooms can help address the criticisms of dehumanization and decontextualization in language teaching.

One of the most important points we can highlight in the above argument is that students in EFL classrooms can express their personal experiences to make meaning of their learning by using the language they learn. Therefore, poetry writing can also become a powerful tool for reflective practice.

According to Schon (1983) in his work "The Reflective Practitioner," reflective practice refers to the ability to analyze and contemplate one's actions to engage in continuous learning. The process of reflection involves recalling actions and considering the associated emotions, experiences, and responses. By doing so, learners can utilize this information to enhance their existing knowledge and achieve a deeper level of comprehension. This concept aligns with Gibb's reflective cycle (Gibbs, 1988), which emphasizes the inclusion of emotions in the reflective process. After learners recall what occurred during the learning experience, they should also reflect on their feelings before, during, and after the learning process. Taking a deliberate step back promotes critical reflection, allowing learners to objectively evaluate their actions. Poetry is a form of expression of emotions, ideas, and viewpoints. Because of this, using it as a tool for student reflection is advised.

One important aspect of poetry writing is the use of experiences in the form of self-expression. When students write their poetry,

they mostly write first based on their experiences. In short, they write about themselves. Considering Haneur's meaningful literacy poetry can be a very useful tool for reflective practice, especially when students infuse their feeling towards their learning process. This reflection, therefore, can be deep and meaningful. They not only recall what they have done during the learning process but also make sense of their learning journey with great appreciation.

This study attempts to explore the themes of the students' poetry in which they reflect on their learning journey during the semester. Thus, poetry becomes not only the product of learning but also the tool to see how they perceive the process that they have been through. As mentioned previously that by looking back at what they have done purposefully, students not only remember but also give meaning to their learning. This study is also an attempt to fill the gap of the lack of the use of poetry writing as the tool of self-reflection and self-expression that leads to meaningful literacy in EFL classrooms, especially in the higher education context.

## METHODOLOGY

This qualitative case study involved 47 students of an English Literature Department of a private university in Indonesia. They were in their 5<sup>th</sup> semester and attended the creative writing course. The course facilitated students with the process of creative writing specifically to help them to write poetry in English. In this course, students were introduced to poetry writing and finally were expected to write their poetry. Poetry appreciation by reading several poems was also included in the lessons. At the end of the course, students wrote learning reflections in the form of poetry.

Students composed their poems by, first, expressing their emotions at the beginning of the course. Then they explained the learning process which was mostly considered challenging and finally, they concluded their learning journey. This composition was arranged differently in terms of the number of lines and verses. It is possible that they were also strongly influenced by the instruction given by the lecturers on how to do reflection in their poems. Though not mentioned that students have to write in a certain order, the instruction stated that students should

express how they feel, think, and perceive the learning process that they have been through.

The learning process, specifically poetry writing, was started in the second half of the semester. Previously students learned to write short stories which according to the informal conversation with them was interesting. This was because it was the only chance that they had the opportunity to write fiction.

The process of poetry writing was based on Kooser's book (2005) entitled *The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice for Beginning Poets*. Ted Kooser was awarded the 13<sup>th</sup> American Poet Laurette from 2004 to 2006. He won Pulitzer Prize in poetry in 2005. Kooser's main advice is used as the backbone of the process of poetry writing in the course: that poetry is communication and that poetry is a gift. As a communication, students should write their poetry as clearly as possible. As long as their feelings, ideas, and/or thought are well communicated their poetry would be fine. As a gift, when writing poetry, students should keep in their mind that whatever they write is for other people. There would be, at least, someone who would read. Therefore, they have to be sure that their poems are understood by others.

This kind of disclaimer somehow keeps the students away from their fear of poetry writing. What they had in mind was that poetry writing should follow strict rules somehow relieved. As long as they follow the disclaimer, they can write poetry. In addition, the instructor kept reminding them that they may revise their poems if they think it is necessary. This adds encourage the students to write their poem and suppress their fear of making mistakes or not following 'the standard' of poetry writing.

To analyze the data, we employed the concept of meaningful literacy by Hanauer (2012). Meaningful literacy involves using writing in a way that (1) incorporates memory, imagination, and personal experiences to delve into and comprehend one's own identity, (2) elicits emotional reactions from both the writer and the reader while encouraging the expression of personal emotions, (3) includes a reflective process that leads to a heightened recognition and understanding of personal experiences, and (4) situates writing within a social context, where personally held beliefs, understandings, and

feelings are shared with others in the language learning classroom and beyond, extending to people and communities that hold significance to the writer.

In our case, we looked at how students reflect their learning process in their poetry by remembering and feeling their experiences to understand and make sense of their learning process. Thus, students were required to write their poetry based on their experience after attending the creative writing class. In Addition, they should write their poetry in the social context of our classroom and intend to share their writing product with the community of our classroom.

The students as the participants in this study were coded with "R" followed by a number instead of their real name, for example, Student 1 was coded as R1, student 2 was coded R2, and so on.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Result

#### Major themes of reflection manifested in students' poetry

Referring to Hanauer's meaningful literacy, the poetry that the students wrote generally reflected their journey of learning in the creative writing class, specifically the process of learning to write poetry. Of 47 poetry, 32 poetry (68.1%) shows students' reflections while 15 others (31.9%) did not show or show very little of students' reflections. This means that students did not follow the instruction to write reflective poetry very well. Instead, they just wrote poetry containing appreciation and thanks to the lecturer and not to the process they had been through.

The major themes that can be derived from those 47 poetries students express (1) their changed perception towards poetry writing, (2) their struggle during the course, (3) increased self-assurance, and (4) their future expectations especially to keep writing poetry in the future. These major themes were generally found in most of the poetry. It means that one poem can include those major themes altogether.

#### Altered Perspective

One of the biggest themes that can be found in this study is that students experience changing perceptions towards poetry writing. At

the beginning of the lesson, most of the students showed their anxiety about starting the class. This anxiety was caused mainly by their negative self-perception toward their writing ability. One of the respondents (R6) expressed his nervousness by comparing his ability in writing to his friends. He was also afraid that he had to write more than he expected. He wrote:

*One word I want to describe this class  
When I heard the name of this course, I was speechless  
I'm not as good as my friends at writing  
Confused and anxious when I know I have to write a lot*

The belief of not being able to write was also expressed directly in one of the respondent's poems (R11). Her reaction to fear was explicitly stated in her poem as shown in the following part:

*I still remember that time, I still remember that fear  
I still remember the first time I was asked to write  
In my brain, there are only questions, anxiety, and fear  
In my brain, there is always a whisper "You can't write" keeps haunting*

The mention of fear and anxiety suggests that writing, or the act of being asked to write, evokes a sense of unease or apprehension within the speaker. This emotional response is further reinforced by the line, "In my brain, there is always a whisper 'you can't write' keeps haunting." This inner voice represents self-doubt and a lack of confidence in one's writing abilities.

In line with the above poem, a poem written by R17 also showed her negative thought that writing is not her best skill. The fact that he should write regularly depressed him terribly. He wrote:

*It is heartbreaking to accept this fact  
That every week there's an assignment to write a poem  
I have never felt happy doing this  
I guess writing is just not my thing*

Further R18 also expressed his fear of writing. He even stated that being creative in creative writing class is not something easy for him. However, in his fear, he had a curiosity about the course. He wrote:

*The first thing that crossed my mind it would be a difficult subject  
and that word "creative" sounds a little creepy.  
I am scared about things that haven't started yet  
But I am also inquisitive about this.*

This negative perception gradually changed as the students move through the course. As they learned the theories of poetry writing introduced by the lecturer, they began to realize that writing poetry was not something fearful as they imagined. Those gradual changes could be seen in the following part of the poem written by R5. Her perception of boring lessons changed as she was facilitated with free writing exercises before writing 'real' poetry. She reflected on her experience as follows:

*When I chose it for this semester  
I had a hunch it would be boring  
Meet for the first time  
You told me to write something random  
In this case  
This changed my view  
Random things are fun*

Metaphorically one of the respondents (R16) perceived poetry writing in his class was like a roller coaster. Everything could finally change. He believed that poetry writing could be scary but could also be fun as well. He reflected:

*Life is like a roller coaster,  
Sometimes up sometimes down  
Like writing class  
It was boring at first but it's starting to get fun now*

These gradual changes in perception from negative to positive are important for the student's development in writing, especially to write poetry. It is also important to let the students deliberately express their real feeling towards the lesson such as fear and anxiety at the beginning or during the lesson. This provided

room for the students to realize that they were developing.

### Students' struggles

The perception of the students to poetry writing would have not changed if students did not make any attempt to get better. From some of their poems, the students reflected on their efforts throughout the semester. In their poetry, most students described that they had mixed feeling about the process of poetry writing. They sometimes felt frustrated yet hopeful. Some saw opportunities in the process of poetry writing they can express their feeling and make sense of meaning to what they wanted to say. As they change their perception, in terms of their struggle, poetry writing to them was something that they have to earn, not just a gift or talent.

This struggle was beautifully reflected in one of the respondents (R1) poems:

*After the wave of sweat and vomit comes a wash of relief.*

*I see the knowledge and although it may not always be beautiful,*

*But I certainly have gained something.*

The above part of the poem depicted how the student took the hard way to produce all poetry she had to write during the semester. In the end, what she did result in something that is her progress.

The following poem from R2 suggested that the students build their way to write poetry step by step:

*One by one the ideas are collected*

*Word by word we arrange*

*Combined into one beautiful sentence*

*Into meaningful poetry*

And so is the following poem from R7:

*This is not a simple journey*

*Not easy but I try*

*When I sit on the chair*

*Very tiring but I don't care*

*String rhymes through one word at a time*

*Create works of various frame*

The following poetry from R25 also shows the hard work she had to make:

*as long as I'm concerned*

*poetry is a work that not everyone can do, maybe?*

*that's good*

*glad to hear that*

*then I tried for the first time, again, seriously it requires creative and imaginative thinking and I feel like,*

*Oh, crying out loud, it is tough*

The poem conveyed the student's initial perceptions and experience with poetry. It reflected a sense of skepticism and uncertainty about the accessibility and difficulty of poetry as an art form. The student acknowledged that not everyone could engage in poetry, which suggested a perception of poetry as something exclusive or reserved for a select few.

The use of the phrase "crying out loud" indicated frustration and exasperation. It implied that the student found poetry challenging and perhaps overwhelming. The line emphasized the perceived toughness of poetry and suggested that the student might have encountered difficulties in expressing their creativity and imagination within the constraints of the art form.

Overall, the poem captured the struggle the student faced when attempting poetry for the first time. It revealed their initial doubts and frustrations while acknowledging the demanding nature of the craft. The student's willingness to try again seriously indicated a sense of determination and growth, despite the perceived difficulties.

The road may get tougher but the students seemed not to want to give up. They started to take risks as reflected in the following poem from respondent R35:

*Better do something and then regret*

*Instead of doing nothing at all*

*What did I start, heavy or light*

*I'll finish it well*

How students struggle to write poetry is an essential part of the learning process. They were aware that the best way to conquer their self-doubt is by doing the assignment given by

the lecturer. They encourage themselves to write no matter what the results were. Also, they dared to take risks no matter what. This stage of struggle was mostly concealed in the middle part of the poetry showing part of the student's learning journey.

### Increased self-assurance

After reflecting on the struggles during the course, the students expressed that they gained the confidence to write poetry. This seemed to show that they made progress. They did not directly state that they finally made great poetry, which of course was not the main goal of the course. Respondent R17 reflected in one part of her poetry that after going through the process of learning and writing, she found out that writing poetry, though challenging, was no longer a burdening task. She wrote:

*Entering my third poem  
I feel turmoil in my heart  
Wait a minute. Is it just like this?  
Turned out that writing poetry is not that difficult*

Another respondent, R44, showed that he was finally encouraged to write poetry despite his worries about failing the class. He tried to take the good side of this poetry writing class as his motivation which is the ability to express his feelings and ideas. This could be a good idea to keep himself trying and have a goal to be successful in producing poetry. He wrote:

*I don't want this class to end so fast  
But, I don't want to fail and repeat this class  
This class gave me the courage to express myself*

Learning, making mistakes, and risk-taking as a sign of struggle to achieve success were also described by R46. She believed that learning the rules, for example, could help her understand and write poetry. She reflected this way:

*Every twist and turns to create masterpieces  
Not very deep like  
Of course, I learned many things  
Also, I made a lot of mistakes*

*Not so deep my poem is  
But forced to write the tasks  
That is hard but I still do it  
And here I am now  
Successfully passed the exposure of thousands of  
valuable rules*

One of the most stunning expressions from one of the respondents, R48, was that after following the learning process she later felt fearless. She wrote:

*Until now, I fight that fear  
Until now, I can write whatever I want  
I can describe that I'm happy or sad in my  
writing  
I can describe when I fall in love or when I'm  
grieving in my writing  
From now on, I won't be afraid to write anymore  
From now on, I am fearless.*

This poem represents a significant shift in the student's mindset and attitude toward writing. It shows a progression from fear and doubt to empowerment and fearlessness.

The repetition of "Until now" suggests a continuation of the previous struggle, indicating that she had been battling fear in her writing journey. However, the subsequent lines revealed a newfound sense of freedom and self-expression. The statement "I can write whatever I want" reflected a liberation from the constraints and limitations that she had felt previously. It signified a breakthrough in her writing abilities and the ability to convey her emotions freely.

The poem emphasizes the power of writing as a means of personal expression and emotional release. The lines "I can describe that I'm happy or sad in my writing" and "I can describe when I fall in love or when I'm grieving in my writing" highlighted her realization that writing allowed her to capture and articulate her various emotional experiences.

The declaration "From now on, I won't be afraid to write anymore" showcased a newfound confidence and determination. The student asserted her commitment to overcome her previous fears and embrace the act of writing without hesitation. The concluding statement, "From now on, I am fearless," encapsulated the transformation and growth the student had

undergone, demonstrating a resolute mindset to approach writing with courage and boldness.

### Future expectation

Although not many students reflected on what they would do next with what they knew and learned about poetry writing, a few expressed their future expectations. One of the students (R1) wrote:

*But worry not, for this knowledge you bestowed  
unto us will certainly guide us  
And perhaps, it'll become a beacon for us to keep  
writing  
even long after your class ends.*

This poetry verse reflected the future expectations of the student regarding poetry writing. The verse began with a reassuring tone, suggesting that there was no need to be concerned or anxious. She also indicated that she felt she had enough knowledge as the lecturer had shared valuable knowledge with her that would have a lasting impact on her. She implied a strong belief in the effectiveness and reliability of this guidance, suggesting that she trusted in the knowledge she had acquired.

The verse showed an element of hope or possibility. It suggested that the knowledge imparted by the lecturer had the potential to become a guiding light or a source of inspiration for the student. It implied that she would use this knowledge as a reference point, a beacon that would encourage her to continue her writing journey even after the class concludes.

The verse also suggested that the student's enthusiasm for writing would endure well beyond the duration of the class. The verse conveyed the idea that the knowledge gained would have a significant influence on the student's future endeavors and writing pursuits.

Another student (R26) expressed his future expectation in a somehow lighter tone compared to the above verse. He wrote:

*I'm grateful because  
I got a new skill to create a masterpiece even if  
only for college grades.  
No offense please, just kidding*

*And for now, maybe this will be a new path to  
finding something  
Whether it matters or not.  
It's only about time.*

The opening line acknowledged a sense of gratitude for obtaining a new skill. It suggested that the student appreciated the opportunity to learn and develop their abilities in creating a masterpiece. This implied that the acquisition of this skill is seen as a positive and valuable experience.

The student added a humorous tone in the next line by stating that the motivation for creating a masterpiece was primarily driven by the desire to achieve good grades in college. The phrase "no offense please, just kidding" indicated that he was not quite serious when stating that. It was meant to be a joke and not meant to offend. What he might mean was somehow he was somehow motivated to write during the course

Next, he suggested that this newfound skill could serve as a starting point or a potential direction for him. It implied that the act of creating a masterpiece could lead to the discovery of something significant. The verse concluded with an indication that he opened to the possibilities that might arise from his creative journey, regardless of the outcome. The last line somehow indicated that the student would possibly continue to write even after the class ended.

### DISCUSSION

This study involved students utilizing their personal learning experiences to create poetry. This reflective approach aligns with Hanauer's concept of meaningful literacy (2012), which emphasizes the importance of using language in meaningful contexts. By doing so, students gain a deeper understanding of their own experiences and develop a personal connection to their learning. This conscious reflection plays a crucial role in the learning process as it enables students to objectively evaluate their progress. This notion is supported by Rosenhan (2019) and Cronin (2019), who argue that self-reflection aids in self-understanding.

Furthermore, incorporating poetry into these reflections provides an additional benefit, allowing students to freely express not only their

thoughts on the learning process but also their emotions. Since emotions are subjective, students can employ humor or even sarcasm in their poems to critique the learning experience if they wish. This freedom to express feelings is significant as it grants students the opportunity for self-expression. Mundy (2022) and Rom (2022) all support this idea. Therefore, the utilization of poetry in language learning, particularly to achieve meaningful literacy, is highly recommended.

### CONCLUSION

According to Hanauer (2012), incorporating poetry into language learning provides students with an opportunity to use the language in a personal and meaningful way. This approach is particularly beneficial in creative writing classrooms, where poetry writing is taught and practiced, as it opens the door to achieving meaningful literacy. Students can draw upon their knowledge, experiences, and emotions to create their poems. By doing so, the language becomes more relevant and applicable to their circumstances, making the learning process more meaningful and engaging.

In this study, students effectively conveyed their personal experiences by demonstrating a shift in their perceptions of poetry writing. Initially, many of them believed that writing poetry was extremely challenging and nearly impossible. This suggests that they may have had preconceived notions or doubts about their abilities in this area.

However, they persisted and displayed their determination to continue, making efforts to improve and refine their work. This dedication to the task at hand is noteworthy as it shows their resilience and determination. As a result, their confidence grew, and they felt encouraged.

Some students even expressed a desire to continue writing poetry beyond the scope of the class. This demonstrates that the students found value and personal fulfillment in the activity, leading them to integrate poetry writing into their ongoing creative endeavors. This indicates that students successfully employed their personal and meaningful expressions in their learning process, which is essential for contextualizing and humanizing language learning.

To further exploring the concept of meaningful literacy, it is suggested that for the future researches more comprehensive data should be employed such as generating students' opinions

using questionnaire and interview to verify students' perceptions.

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