

Narrative Surprise and the Challenges of Teaching Creative Writing in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract:

“ナラティブ・サプライズ”は短編フィクションの原動力である。物語がゆっくりと進む長編小説とは違い、短編の場合、読み手の満足する結末、多くの場合は予想外の結末が成功の鍵を握る。アリストテレスが指摘する「意外性と必然性」の伴う筋立てを作ることは、母国語を使った書き手にとっても非常に難しい。それが第二・第三言語で初めて書く場合、いかに途方もない試みか、想像に難くないだろう。魅力的なフィクションを紡ぎ出す過程で、書き手がしばしば直面するのは、予めどの程度筋立てを決めておくか、という問いである。結末を決めてから書き始めるべきなのか？ コンテンポラリー・フィクションの作家の多くは、書き始めるときに結末のある物語のアイデアには一種の呪縛が内在すると感じている。それは読み手にとっても、展開が容易に予想できてしまう可能性が高いからだ。その代わり、作家たちはページごとに発見する流動的で有機的なストーリーの連なりに着目する。コンセプトや人物像、場所や時代設定などまず考え、それらが内発的に物語を動かしていくことで書き進め、読み手にとっても思いがけない展開を生むのだ。EFLの学生にとって、この手法は難易度が高いと言えるだろう。筋立てが決まっていると、構成力ではなく言語習得の向上に集中することが出来るが、始まりから終わりまで単調な物語になることが多い。

本論文は、決められた結末と具体的な展開を予め求めがちな EFL の学生の習性を踏まえた上で、“ナラティブ・サプライズ”の現代的な理論について、独創性に富むエッセイ、チャールズ・バクスターの“Against Epiphanies”を用いて考察する。それに加え、言語習熟度の向上のために必要な環境を整えた上で、学生がより流動的なアプローチで有機的に物語を表現できるよう、授業での導入・実践方法を探る。

Introduction:

The poet Robert Frost is often quoted as saying, “No tears for the writer, no tears for the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader,” intimating the importance for the writer to remain open to discovery. A story or poem whose shades and turns are too *known* from the start, too often produces a writing experience, and by default, a reading experience that feels more mechanical than earned. The writer who puts their hands to work at the opening sentence knowing exactly what will happen at the end, will often write in a narrative straight line, rushing at high speeds towards what they have already imagined, instead of waiting, taking the time to see what each sentence or paragraph brings, turning with the road they are simultaneously creating. Perhaps in our modern age, the equivalency to knowing from the start is equal to plotting our story destinations into Google Maps. *In three paragraphs, your character will die in a mountain climbing accident.* Helpful for making it to the restaurant on time, a hindrance for writing impactful creative work.

Finding our way towards a true narrative surprise is both arduous and confounding for any writer even when working at full strength in their native language. Imagine then how perplexing it might be for student writers attempting to create stories for the first time in a second or third language. In our academic writing classrooms, we stress the importance of outlining, organizing, pre-writing, etc. Anything that better prepares our students for the process of writing, to help them produce work that is logical, researched, and demonstrates competency in their use of language. There, we ask our students to think of each paragraph as a focused piece of writing, of a topic sentence that leads to an unpacking of supporting analysis, evidence, examples, and conclusions. Unity, clarity, in-depth knowledge of the topic, are the equations that lead to success. Creative work is more difficult to plan, but for many of our second language learners, it seems

their instinct when they begin creative work is similar to their instinct when they begin an argumentative essay. There is comfort in *knowing*. When they have a direction for their work, it is easier to move forward and find the language for a story. When they know the ending, they can begin. How can we get students to reconsider their process? To understand that different forms of writing require different techniques? To see the value in *not-knowing*? Writer Donald Barthelme makes the point clearly: “The not-knowing is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made. Without the scanning process engendered by not-knowing, without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention”(12).

I. Models and Theories

As we begin our discussion on the subject of narrative surprise, we look towards the American short story writer and novelist, Charles Baxter, for guidance. Beyond his accomplished stories and novels, Baxter is known for writing a seminal collection of essays on the craft of fiction, *Burning Down the House*. In interviews, Baxter has said that he creates characters he likes and then “visits trouble on them” and also that “stories begin when things start to go wrong.” In class, we use both of these ideas as the starting point to consider the framework of narrative surprise, and akin to outlining in academic writing, work to identify common narrative elements of short fiction. In my experience, students move quickly to decide the ending to their stories because they feel as though ‘creating’ from nothing, especially in a second or third language is too daunting of a task considering the other language hurdles they have in front of them. In an effort to encourage students to remain open to discovery on the page, it is important to give them *stations* to work towards, helping to alleviate the feeling that everything must be made from whole cloth, sentence by sentence. Building on Baxter’s points of *character* and *trouble*, we consider other mechanics of the short

story, such as *opening circumstance, event, and surprise*. Once we have generated and defined a number of narrative techniques, students are then asked to read examples of short fiction that employ these elements in a straightforward way such as Kate Chopin's "A Story of an Hour" or "Gregory" by Panos Ioannides.

In each of our model stories, after establishing the central characters and opening setting or situation, there is an *event* that serves as the engine to the push the story forward, either slowly or suddenly, propelling those characters towards the *trouble* that complicates the work and shepherds us towards the *surprise*. At the start of Chopin's classic, "A Story of an Hour," Mrs. Mallard discovers that her husband has died in a train accident, the news of which sends Mrs. Mallard to lock herself in her room. In "Gregory," the title character, a prisoner of war, has a gun placed to his head in the opening moments before the story moves backward to reveal who Gregory is and how he's spent his time with his captors. To Baxter's point, these stories waste no time *visiting trouble* on their characters, and that *trouble*, that narrative inflection point when *things go wrong*, generates the tension that keeps the reader reading. But what then? What responsibility does the writer have to the reader once they *hook* their attention? Both of these stories might have unfolded more predictably, if the writers allowed for no discovery, no deeper sense of narrative surprise. Locked in her room, Mrs. Mallard is transformed by the knowledge of her husband's death and by the realization that she's *free at last*, and a lesser writer than Chopin might open the door and allow her to walk happily into her new life. Or perhaps a lesser writer than Ioannides might use this narrative technique of showing us Gregory, his close relationship to his captors, to make us care about this imperiled man, and then, in the story's closing moments, allow him to escape. Both of these endings might have been *easier*, but would have left us far less satisfied or challenged than what Chopin and Ioannides found by crafting endings of true meaning and surprise. Chopin opens the door, Mrs. Mallard goes downstairs. The

doorbell rings, her husband walks in, and she dies of a heart attack—of a *joy that kills*. Ioannides puts a gun to Gregory’s head and then makes us care about him, showing us in detail how he lived with the soldiers, who are ordered to kill him. They do, ruefully blaming their orders and Gregory for not escaping when he had the chance. These endings are both bitter and tragic and surprising for their emotional and human honesty. Mrs. Mallard was not going to get free, not in that life and time, and Gregory was never going to avoid the bullet. And yet what makes both of those stories masterful are the way they avoid their own conventions, the way they remained open to discovery and thus allowed the reader to discover as well.

A second habit that undermines student’s ability to reach surprising conclusions is a tendency to write towards endings concluding in an epiphany or last moment revelation. This habit is not limited to EFL students alone, but many young creative writing students. In his essay “Against Epiphanies,” Baxter cautions writers to avoid this type of ending that is too often found in contemporary fiction—stories that find their climax in revelation, in complete clarity for the character, and by default the reader. Baxter believes that audiences have come so often to expect an ‘epiphany’ at the end of a story, it inevitably makes the work more predictable. “One other trouble with epiphanic endings is that they have become a tic, a habit among writers (and editors) of literary fiction. Insights provide a certain kind of closure, and, not to put too vulgar a point on it, a payoff,” he writes. “Radiance, after a while, gets routine”(53). Deeply influenced by the films and TV they’ve seen or the stories they have read or their conception of what an ending is, students feel they must deliver a moment of clarity or revelation, in order to satisfy the reader. These false endings are often decided very early on in the writing process, and the student, so eager to get the reader to this one powerful moment rushes forward, not permitting the development of character and story needed to make those final moments as impactful as they intend. One antidote to this habit is to

have students read stories that end without a tidy bow, stories that rely more on *tone* or *emotion* at the climax, without saying explicitly what it meant and why it happened. Kazuo Ishiguro’s “A Family Supper” is a good example of a story that leaves the reader wondering, without any clear resolution, what has happened or what will happen. Will the family continue their normal lives? Has the father poisoned them all? Those questions allow the reader to carry the story forward in their mind, to imagine the many possibilities that might exist after the final sentence. As Baxter points out, another trouble with epiphanies at the end of stories is that they cause the reader to stop. “Insights leave one stunned...And sometimes the epiphanic insight is not so radiant. You discover you are going to spend your life in Laundromats, fighting other people to get access to the dryers. In most stories, this moment, which is understood in our literary tradition to be important and climactic, carries with it a stop-time effect”(48-49). Once students can see beyond the typical examples of epiphanic or revelatory endings they can begin to allow their stories space to develop. Instead of writing towards an ending where the student’s goal is mainly to reach these often anticipated conclusions, they can concentrate on the people and circumstances of the worlds they have created, allowing the interactions and ideas of the story to determine the way forward and the way out.

II. Language Inventories

Without questions students in the EFL classroom need language support to make them more successful writers. As discussed earlier, in our academic writing classes, the supportive techniques are clearer and better established. When writing creative fiction, in particular, a story based around the concept of narrative surprise, the challenge is to give students enough guidance to assist them in generating fictive worlds, while also encouraging them to wait for the “unanticipated” and moments of “invention” that Barthelme championed. One way to

assist students is to have them create what we might call *language inventories* for their fictive worlds. Similar to brainstorming in academic work, *language inventories* ask students to think of their opening scene/setting circumstance, and then ask themselves what objects, people, places, might populate that opening moment. For example, we can imagine a story that opens in a park where a man is waiting to meet his son from whom he has been estranged for many years. Without thinking of what happens when this meeting takes place, we can use a language inventory to *see* this moment and this moment alone. What does the man look like? What is he wearing? What's the weather? Are there other people there? What emotion is the man experiencing at the start? The inventory can consist of any combination of single words, complex sensory details, anything that helps spark the process of imagining a moment before writing about it. If we think of a story consisting of a series of rooms in a dark house, then this method helps the writer turn the light on in each room, one at a time. The writer has entered the house ahead of the reader without knowing all of its shape and contents. The writer's job is to discover each room as clearly for the reader as possible, so when the reader enters this world, they see everything with the depth and clarity the writer intends. The writer E.L. Doctorow famously said, "Writing is like driving a car at night: you never see further than your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way." Whichever metaphor one subscribes to, language inventories can help to add light to the room or the road to make the writing-navigation easier. Doing this in list form instead of writing in formal sentence structure, frees the student from the pressure of getting the sentence and the detail right from the start, something that our ESL students often say is the reason they want to know the entire story from the first sentence. As the students sit down to write this opening scene, they can begin placing these details into the sentences where appropriate. Also, students comment that when they do this, the inventory details they began with, often change or expand

once they become real parts of their stories. Whereas before, when they saw stories as mainly motored by plot, where each sentence was meant to move their characters from point A to point B towards the ending they've already imagined, these inventories help to facilitate a more deliberate writing process by allowing students to concentrate on the texture of the story instead of the action.

III. Narrative Story Group Exercise

A final exercise that has been helpful to get students to reconsider their process is to have them take part in an activity where they construct a story in groups, simulating the creation of the short fiction they are about to write.

Step I: Character/Opening Situation

First, groups are asked to create a character. They must write down basic details of the character including name, age, physical description, occupation if they have one. They also must write 1-2 sentences about what is happening to the character at the opening of their story. Usually, this first task instigates their instinct to jump ahead. Instead of simply writing what is happening to the character in the opening scene, they see this step as a chance to project further into the story. In an example from a recent class, one group wrote: *A maintenance man finds a lost mobile phone in a hotel room and discovers it belongs to the man his wife is having an affair with.* In a sentence, the students revealed the event, trouble, and surprise. The story is already there, no point in writing it. After checking each group's work to make sure they haven't raced ahead, I tell them we will soon move on to the next step. Usually, at this stage, the groups are eager to keep working on their stories. The difficulty remains, that even if they have satisfied the requirements of not rushing ahead on their assignment page, many have already imagined most of the story in their minds. At this point I

ask them to pass their character to another group.

Step II: Background Information

At first, each group seems pained to lose the character they created, but also curious about the one they receive. In the second turn, groups are asked to read the character description and opening circumstance. After they familiarize themselves with the previous group's efforts, they are instructed to write background information about the character that might help define the character for the reader. The groups are also asked to add characters to the story and describe those characters in detail. Once this task is completed, they are asked to pass their paper to the next group in rotation.

Step III: Trouble

In the third rotation, groups are asked to read the character description, opening situation, and background information. They then are asked to imagine the trouble this character might face. Once they've decided on the trouble, they must write a brief description of the trouble to make it clear for the next group.

Step IV: Event

Here the next group works backward. After reading the trouble the previous group has imagined for the character, the group in the fourth rotation, must now imagine what event or events lead the character to that trouble. Since *event* and *trouble* are inextricably linked, it is often easier for students to imagine the event once they have a sense of what trouble their character will encounter. (Of course, these steps can be reversed.) Students at this stage are also asked to add other characters to the story, to help to populate this world.

Step V: Surprise

In the final rotation, the groups are meant to read through all of the

details the other groups have added, and now, finally, imagine the *surprise* that brings the story to a close.

After all the steps are completed, the papers are returned to the original group who then review everything their characters went through. The original groups are asked: *How is this different from what you imagined for your character? What did you think of what your character went through? Was the ending surprising?* Most say that the other groups pushed their stories in directions they hadn't considered. When turning to write their individual stories, I ask them to remember that, remember that feeling of surprise while they craft their stories. The activity is structured to give the students the experience of being simultaneously the writer and the reader. The reader receives information with each new sentence, and the writer's job is to make each sentence feel new as it is written. The most talented among us perhaps can achieve that feat even when they know many sentences ahead where they are going, but for the rest of us, it is vital to remain open. This assignment is done towards the beginning of the semester and serves as a primer for other creative work, including creative non-fiction and essay writing.

Conclusion:

Each writing assignment comes with its own language, its own form and technique. In this way, creative writing can be equally valuable to foreign language learners by asking them to seek means of expression not found in other writing environments. In these classes, when students' readership is limited, the true value of the *surprise* for the writer that Frost declared imperative at the start, is developmental and elucidating. As students discover the unexpected in their work, their focus grows. They reach for vivid language. They spend time crafting single sentences, hunting for the perfect detail. What seemed

merely an assignment at the start becomes a journey, one that they're in control of and are responsible for. Over the years I have seen a transformation in the quality of student creative writing and writing in general, simply by asking them to question their instinct to run ahead, to see too much, too soon. Impressing patience on students, throwing up caution signs, speed bumps to slow their approach in the creative writing classroom can teach young writers the most valuable lesson—that writing is a process. A sometimes slow and slowing process where remaining open at the start plays an integral role in producing an effective and satisfying and *surprising* piece of work. Encouraging students to exercise these different language muscles, to have the resolve to wait and find something new at each turn, can go a long way to making them better writers.

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