Bringing creativity back into the classroom:

Creative writing in EFL education

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1 May 2015

Word count: 14,604

Masterscriptie Engelse Taal en Cultuur, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen
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1. Introduction

Creative writing classes are immensely popular in the United Kingdom and the United States. Creative writing is not only taught at secondary and high schools, but it is also taught as an academic discipline at universities and colleges. Since the end of the 1980s increasingly more students enroll for such courses (Lim, 2003; Thebo, 2012). However, in the Netherlands creative writing does not enjoy such popularity in the education system, not even Dutch creative writing. Still, this does not mean that there are no Dutch students who write creatively. It is not impossible to find students who write for examples, poems, short stories, lyrics or fan fiction in Dutch as well as in English. An informal survey among English teachers also shows that, despite creative writing not being a regular part of the curriculum, some of them do use creative writing assignments to teach English (see appendix A for a detailed description of the survey). Such assignments range from writing love letters to horror stories to alternative endings for novels. At one secondary school in Groningen students even write their own screenplays for school plays.

The focus of the present study is the writing of fiction as a tool for English language acquisition of secondary school students in the Netherlands. Because of its limited scope, this paper will only look at creative writing’s potential for students in the second phase of secondary education. The second phase consists of the last two years of HAVO (senior general secondary education) and the last three years of VWO (university preparatory education), the two highest levels of secondary education in the Netherlands. Common criticism of literature is that literary language is deviant language and has therefore no place in the foreign language (FL) classroom. However, I will disregard this argument in this paper, because not only does the “literariness” of the language in literature vary considerably, but
the “errors” in literary language are also always deliberate and can therefore still teach learners about the language. In the Netherlands the study of literature is compulsory for all students in the second phase, but the writing of fiction is not a genre generally explored in great detail in language classes. Yet creative writing’s popularity in the United States and Great Britain warrants the investigation of its place in a FL curriculum. In order to provide a well-founded recommendation either for or against implementing creative writing in EFL (English as a foreign language) classes, this article will not only examine creative writing’s potential from a theoretical point of view, but will also analyze the results of existing empirical studies on FL creative writing. It will furthermore consider the feasibility of implementing FL creative writing in the secondary education system in the Netherlands. Language learners acquire a foreign language in a significantly different way than their native language, but creative writing’s enjoyable and motivating nature might still stimulate language acquisition despite that difference. It is therefore expected that creative writing will prove to be a valuable language learning tool in EFL classes. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the linguistic theory behind FL acquisition and FL writing in particular; chapter 3 analyses existing empirical research on FL creative writing; chapter 4 examines the possible implementation of creative writing in current EFL programs in secondary education in the Netherlands; and chapter 6 concludes the paper.
2. The theory behind FL creative writing

Language acquisition begins with the student. Language learning is an extremely complicated and complex phenomenon, because every student acquires language in a different way. Teachers should take these differences into account when designing their lesson plans. FL students differ significantly from native (L1) and even second language (L2) students. A foreign language is not acquired in the same way the native language is learned. FL writing, on the other hand, differs not so much from writing in one’s native language in theory. However, language proficiency does influence a students’ ability to write significantly. This means that FL writing is not a straightforward process. Creative writing’s literary aspect can stimulate the student to experiment with the language despite a possibly weak proficiency. Creative writing can be a great opportunity for language acquisition and the development of language skills, because it motivates students to explore and play around with the language. This chapter offers a view on creative writing in a foreign language from a purely theoretical perspective to serve as the foundation for the examination of empirical research on this topic in the next chapter.

2.1 FL writers and writing

Writing and the teaching of writing did not receive significant attention as an important area of research before the 1960s, because writing was considered to be only a representation of speech. However, with the development of composition studies in the United States and the emergence of the field of L2 writing, both L1 and L2 or FL writing became important in their own right (Leki, 2000; Matsuda, 2003). L2 learners usually include anyone learning a language other than their native language, but when L2 writing became firmly established as a focus of research, a distinction was made between second languages and foreign
languages. We speak of FL learners when the target language “is not prevalent in the country of residence” (Schmitt, 2010: p. 237). This means that the language does not have official status or plays a considerable role in society in any other way. FL learners differ, for example, from English language learners in the United States or French language learners in Canada, where the languages have official status. In general, FL learners have limited access to the target language and will not naturally learn the language outside of class. Originally, writing research focused on English as a second language, but over the last few decades interest in English as a foreign language (EFL) has increased exponentially (Reichtelt, 1999; Reichtelt, Lefkowitz, Rinnert, & Schultz, 2012). There is now a wide body of work addressing pedagogical issues relating to teaching EFL writing, the empirical investigation of EFL writing, and work that is primarily theoretical in nature (for bibliographies on FL writing see, for example, Reichtelt, 2001; 2009; 2011). However, it is difficult to generalize EFL research from different countries, because not only do the proficiency levels vary significantly within age groups; the way English is taught and the importance of the subject within the curriculum also differ.

Even though writing is a process that is very similar in its general outlines for L1 and L2 writers, ELF learners differ significantly from L1 learners. Teachers of EFL writing must take into account that the students are still in midst of acquiring the language and developing their language proficiency. For example, these students generally have smaller vocabularies than native speakers, their grammar is still developing, and they are unfamiliar with the rhetorical patterns of the language (Albrechtsen et al., 2008; Manchón, Roca de Larios, & Murphy, 2009; Ortega, 2009). Additionally, EFL students often have very little exposure to English. EFL learners are usually not surrounded by the target language. This results in limited access to real-life English use. They will mostly come into contact with
English spoken by other foreign language speakers instead of with the English spoken by native speakers. For FL students, English is not needed in everyday life as it would be in a context where English was an official second language. Their need for the language is primarily limited to the classroom. This narrow context in which the language plays a part in the students’ life negatively affects their language acquisition process and motivation to learn the language (Dörnyei & Schmidt, 2001; Reichtelt, 2012). Furthermore, EFL classes are generally not elective. Students in many countries cannot choose not to take them. This means that not all EFL students will be eager to learn English or motivated to improve their language proficiency. This places extra pressure on teachers to convince and stimulate learners to engage with the program. These characteristics of EFL learners can have a significant impact on the students’ motivation for learning the foreign language, consequently affecting language acquisition. Consequently, teachers cannot teach EFL writing as they would L1 writing.

Teachers should be aware of the role they are to play in their students’ learning process. As said before, EFL students do not have much opportunity to experience real-world English. If they do come across English spoken by native speakers, it is usually in television programs, movies, and books, which is mostly scripted language. Because of this lack of exposure to spontaneous, everyday language, it is important that teachers create useful learning activities in class. As said before, one of the most difficult challenges is to motivate students who might be reluctant to participate. Unfortunately, learning is the most effective when the motivation comes from the student instead of from external stimuli (Ushioda, 2008). The teacher has to create an environment that stimulates the student to admire the target language and to understand the importance of learning and studying it. With regards to teaching writing, students will only be motivated to work hard when they
understand why being able to write well is important for them personally (Andrade, 2012). Students need to be genuinely interested in the topics they write about and to feel they are engaging in authentic communication, before they can truly get involved in their writing. Only when they feel a real need to communicate their thoughts and feelings, will they search for the language forms that can best convey their message. The teacher and the classroom environment are important factors in achieving these conditions.

A number of theories describing L2 writing have developed since the emergence of the field. As mentioned previously, writing in a second or foreign language is in its general outline very similar to writing in one’s native language. That is why theories on L2 writing draw heavily on theories on L1 writing. The different theories focus in general on five different aspects of writing: content; language; the writing process; genre and context; and the reader (Hyland, 2003; Hyland 2011). However, these theories should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Writing is a complex activity and writers will only be able to write well if they take all aspects into account. Consequently, teaching only one side of writing will not produce good writers. Nonetheless, teachers usually take one aspect as a starting point for their classes, but they should take care to not completely ignore the other sides of writing.

One of the most important insights into writing of the past few decades is that writing is not only the production of a text; it is a process. According to Zamel (1983), writing is a “non-linear, exploratory and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they approximate meaning” (p. 165). This approach to writing moves away from emphasizing the final product. This orientation is more concerned with the student writer, the writing process, and the strategies used by the writer. The entire writing task is examined from start to finish. It is important to keep in mind that writing starts well before the writer puts pen to paper. The task begins the moment the writer
decides to write something. The most widely accepted model of writing is the one by Flower and Hayes (Flower, 1989; Flower and Hayes, 1981).

[In this model,] planning, drafting, revising, and editing do not follow a neat linear sequence, but are recursive, interactive, and potentially simultaneous, and all work can be reviewed, evaluated, and revised, even before any text has been produced at all. At any point the writer can jump backward or forward to any of these activities. (Hyland, 2003: 11)

In this process approach to writing, it is the teacher’s task to help students develop effective strategies of how to best go about writing in the first place, with the actual writing only being a part of the process.

The teacher must take on a facilitating role in teaching these strategies. Hyland (2003) points out that writing is a skill that is “learned, not taught” (p. 9). The teacher should provide and maintain a positive and encouraging classroom environment, in which students are allowed to go through their writing processes independently. Students need to put theory into practice before they can truly master the skill. Instead of prescribing a set of strategies, teachers should assist students in developing their own strategies for drafting, revising, and editing their work. Ferris and Hegdecock (2014) also call for developing students’ ability to reflect on the strategies they use. Only then can they truly understand how the composing process works and evaluate and adjust their own strategies. These strategies and skills are necessary for writing in any type of genre or in any language. Even though teaching writing in a second language might seem very similar to teaching writing in their native language, it is important for teachers to keep in mind that the students themselves differ significantly in terms of motivation and exposure to the target language.
While teachers should not treat writing differently, they should approach the students differently.

### 2.2 Literature in FL education

Learning a language is often complemented by studying the culture of the people speaking the language, generally through studying their literature. This is because literature reflects how people see themselves, their society, and the world around them. Consequently, FL students can use literary texts to see the world from different perspectives, expanding their own world views. Matos (2012) argues that literature can play an important role in foreign language education, because it “shares, exchanges, interrogates and communicates the complexity of cultural identities.” (p. 83). Literature teaches students the values, attitudes, and beliefs of another culture. Writers do not only show how they see their own society through literature, but they often use literature to also criticize it, encouraging the reader to compare the attitudes portrayed with their own belief system. This not only creates understanding, but also acceptance and appreciation of that which is different, resulting in personal development on a fundamental level. Instead of teaching foreign language students about the culture they are interested in, literature provides an opportunity to discover that culture for themselves. Literature is more than a simple pastime; it teaches readers about the possibilities and complexities of human life, a subject not often directly touched upon in other classes.

Literature is used in the language classroom for linguistic reasons as well. First of all, literature is a rich source of diverse and authentic language use. Literature features the English language in a form that other types of texts do not. This means that to foreign language students literary texts are an important addition of authentic language use,
because they come into contact with the language in primarily artificial situations, such as the language classroom. In addition to developing students’ linguistic knowledge, literature can also be used to develop awareness and an appreciation of precise, nuanced, and sophisticated language (Lazar, 1996; Vandrick, 2003). Literature uses and manipulates language to add strength to the message they want to convey. Writers of literature understand the power of language, the way it affects the reader’s response to the message. A good writer knows, for example, when to use emotional language and when to use more plain language to effectively transfer the picture he has in his mind into the mind of the reader. This does not always work in a straightforward way. For example, sometimes the most objective description of a tragedy will evoke the most emotional response in a reader. A good writer is aware of his audience and how they will respond. Still, this does not mean that this type of language is not relevant in practical language programs. Writing in any genre requires an understanding of the power of language. Almost any type of writing is persuasive, even seemingly objective academic reports. The writer always takes a stand in favor of something over another and a writer has to convince the reader through language that he is right. If not properly presented, even the most compelling evidence will fail to convince a reader. A writer needs to make use of the persuasive potential of language to make a strong case. Creative language, such as word-play, is also very common in ordinary conversations. Moreover, Sage (1987) points out that in literature “the student encounters nearly every kind of communicative technique speakers use or think of using. Literature displays a broader range of such communication strategies than any other single teaching component” (p. 6). All in all, literature can make up for the lack of exposure to authentic English and provides students with a wide variety of language use to improve their language knowledge and communicative skills. Secondly, literature encourages students to read. In
general, most students prefer a text in the form of a story or a narrative (Vandrick 2003; Lazar, 1996). This is because reading literature is more enjoyable than other types of writing. Narratives naturally arouse interest in the reader, urging him to read on. They are written specifically to connect with the reader instead of primarily focusing on transferring information as is the case with a more academic style of writing. Readers also feel more personally connected to literature, because literary texts are emotionally engaging. Motivation to read in turn results in more engaged responses to the text in both discussions and writing (McKay, 1982; Vandrick, 2003). When the text triggers an emotional response as well as an intellectual one, students will be more inclined to share and defend their points of view, practicing their foreign language skills. Students will be reluctant to express their opinions in a foreign language if they are unsure of what they want to say in the first place. This kind of motivation facilitates FL students’ investment in improving their language proficiency. Moreover, reading literature can improve students’ writing abilities. In the past reading and writing were treated as separate skills, but reading has been identified as the starting point for writing. Students who read more are usually better writers (Hyland, 2003; Schmitt, 2010). This is because texts, literary or otherwise, provide good models of writing. One cannot become great at something without studying the masters first. From literature in particular, students can learn how to manipulate language and find new ways of expressing ideas. It also encourages critical thinking and incites response and subsequently discussion, which are arguably the foundations of good writing (Vandrick, 2003). In addition, studying and responding to literary texts help students to develop a more nuanced style of writing, because literature’s ambiguous nature stimulate students to take varying points of view (Oster, 1989). Furthermore, one of the key ingredients of an interesting and engaging text is creativity. People tire of hearing the same message over and over, but they will be put off if
they do not recognize anything familiar, because will not be able to relate to the text. People therefore respond well to creative texts, because it transforms the familiar into something new. By providing examples of good and creative writing, studying literature can help students improve their own writing. In order to be creative and create something new from something old, students need access to a lot of creative input. In short, next to the more objective and academic texts usually used in language classes, literature can provide input that both stimulates engagement with language learning and help develop proficiency in areas of the language that would otherwise have been ignored.

Literature teachers should take on a guiding role in this learning process. They must always keep in mind that they do not teach literature; similar to teaching writing, they teach students how to study literature themselves. This includes handing them strategies they can use for understanding, interpreting, and analyzing the text. A common mistake teachers often make is not giving students the opportunity to first experience and respond to the text themselves (Brumfit and Carter, 2000). Students’ responses to a literary text are extremely personal and should not be restricted by the teacher’s interpretation. Responses depend, for example, on students’ cultural background and previous experiences with other cultures, on their ability to place the text in the framework of other texts in which it exists (i.e. intertextual knowledge), and not in the least on their language proficiency (Benton, 1996). Additionally, students’ interpretations are always colored by their own personal experiences, because they relate what they read to something that is familiar to them (Weber, 1996). The meaning and function of the text is in part determined by the reader. Teachers who teach large groups of students must allow for greatly varying responses to the same text and should encourage students to share their interpretations with each other. Teachers must facilitate and guide students’ responses and interpretations without restricting them or
imposing on them preconceived ideas. In this sense, teaching literature goes well with teaching writing, because the teacher must take on the same type of supportive role. Instead of focusing on the transfer of knowledge, teachers instead teach students how to acquire and develop the necessary skills themselves.

### 2.3 Creative writing in the FL classroom

The actual writing of literature in a foreign language is not an activity often done in the language classroom. However, creative writing can improve language acquisition and expand the study of literature. Creative writing is a free and open-ended exercise. Generally in language and literature courses writing exercises are heavily constrained by specific academic goals. For example, students are not often allowed to choose their own topics or the format to write in. Students are expected to write in an academic style which does not allow much room for creativity or experimentation. These constraints reduce the language learning progress of the student (Moffett, 1981). To be able to write good texts, students need to be personally involved with their writing, for which they need more freedom in their choices. Making choices forces students to think about what they are doing. They need to think about what they want to say before they can choose one option over another. Demanding more involvement from the student will result in more committed students. In addition, creative writing provides students with an opportunity to express themselves in a very personal way. However, writing literature is more than just writing down whatever comes to mind. Students can write something that conveys how they feel or think and still practice their English at the same time. Because they can write something that really means something to them, students feel there is a real reason to communicate effectively (Tibbetts, 1997). Students need to pay attention to correct and appropriate language, because that
partly determines whether a reader will understand the message the writer is trying to send. Additionally, students become more aware of how language works. Language does not only convey a literal message, but it also creates a particular tone and expresses a specific emotion and this influences if and how the message is received and interpreted. Of course, students will also get a sense of how language works from studying literature, but students need to practice with writing themselves before this passive knowledge can be transformed into an active skill. Creative writing also invites students to transform their emotions and experiences into an appealing form of art. The creative process encourages students to try “more complex forms that take into account multiple constraints, including audience, character development, description, plot development, and of course, language” (Schultz, 2001: p. 95). In other words, even though creative writing is essentially a free exercise, creative writers must still be able to work with certain restrictions and some writers will be able to do this better than others. Consequently, any piece of creative writing can be assessed and graded, granted that the assessment will be fairly subjective. Creative writing allows students the freedom to develop their language skills in ways academic writing tasks cannot. Despite creative writing’s personal and open-ended nature, it would be short-sighted to dismiss it as a discipline that teaches nothing about language and language form. Furthermore, the personal nature of creative writing makes it more engaging for the student than other writing tasks. As said before, students need to be personally committed to the writing assignment before they can effectively practice and develop their writing skills. With creative writing students are by definition personally invested, because they must always draw on their own feelings, thoughts, and experiences for their texts. Unfortunately, this is a double-edged sword. One the one hand, there will be students who are reluctant to open up in class and for them these types of assignments will be extremely difficult; on the other,
there will be students who will rejoice at the opportunity to get away from the primarily academic writing they are used to. Those students will be more willing to experiment with the grammar, vocabulary, and language structures they need to express their ideas and that is the first step toward mastering them. Additionally, Tibbetts (1997) argues that because the students are more actively involved, the language items they practice are retained more easily. Because creative writing motivates students to truly commit to the assignment, they are more involved with the development of their language proficiency. Moreover, creative writing invites students to study literature in a different context. In regular literature classes students are constrained by conventional literary analysis in their interaction with the text. Creative writing students must look at literary texts to see how literature can stimulate them emotionally and intellectually, and what they can learn from it in terms of writing. More so than they would in literature classes, students must analyze the text on a stylistic level. They can explore the intricacies of language that would perhaps have gone unnoticed in literature classes and study the way language is used to achieve desired effects in more detail (Schultz, 2001). In order to write creatively themselves, students need to understand literature in a way regular literature classes do not require. Finally, perhaps contrary to popular belief, writing literature does not encourage using incorrect grammar or punctuation. In fact, creative writing calls for complete language accuracy. As Tibbetts (1997) explains, creative writers are not “linguistic anarchists who hurl deviant grammar around only to prove they are [writers]” (p. 100). In literature non-standard grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation are always deliberate. Students need to learn how to incorporate idiosyncratic language in their writing to serve specific communicative effects. Students can only get their message across accurately if their language is accurate. Including creative writing in the language curriculum will allow students another way to improve their proficiency and literary understanding.
To create a classroom environment that is optimally suited for creative writing, teachers should focus on writing as a process. Students need a safe and encouraging learning environment to be able to learn and practice writing prose or poetry. Because creative writing is such a personal exercise, it can leave students extremely vulnerable to the opinions of others. However, to progress in their development in the most efficient way, students need to share their work with their teacher and their classmates. It is therefore important the students feel comfortable enough to do so. The process approach, combined with regular peer review exercises, create the healthy classroom environment that is needed for productive writing (Barnett, 1989; Gaudiani, 1981). Focus on the process instead of the end product will boost students’ willingness to try and make mistakes. Schultz (2010) also stresses that it is the end-product approach that is partly responsible for students’ mistaken impression that “writers are born with innate genius and that they can produce a great work the first time they put pen to paper” (p. 101). Placing a focus on writing as a process instead of writing as a product will encourage committed participation from the students. In addition, the process approach also encourages positive feedback. Regular peer review lets students get used to sharing their work with others and having their work critiqued. Because they are aware their text is a draft and not a finished product, students are more likely to accept critique and offer positive feedback and suggestions for improvement in return. Consequently, peer review creates a less stressful writing environment in which students can optimally engage with the writing exercise. Furthermore, using a process approach in combination with peer review will also encourage language acquisition. When giving feedback on the works of others and rewriting their own texts, students must not only look at grammar and vocabulary; they must also pay attention to other language elements, such as register and style. In creative writing, register and style may vary much more than in
formal, academic text. Correcting errors in their own work and suggesting points of improvement in those of others brings the student into contact with a wide variety of language. Allowing the students to learn from each other, the teacher takes on the role of advisor, assisting the general process of the students’ writing. By incorporating peer collaboration in the process approach, students strengthen each other’s language development, while the teacher facilitates the process. Teachers play an important role in students’ learning-to-write process, but instead of focusing on teaching writing, they should guide their students’ writing, because writing is a prime example of a skill that is learned by doing.

To summarize, theoretically, adding creative writing to the FL curriculum has nothing but advantages. One of the key problems of teaching a foreign language is the motivation of the students. Creative writing can help keep the students motivated and interested in learning the language. Committed students develop their language proficiency faster and more easily. Creative writing also encourages the students to explore parts of the language not covered in other writing courses, stimulating language acquisition. Additionally, creative writing prompts students to take a different perspective on literary texts, expanding their literary understanding. They will learn to approach literature from another angle, offering insights to students who might not have connected with the text in a traditional literature class. There is no one right way to language teaching, because every student acquires and masters a language in their own way. Most teachers will teach groups as big as 30 students and they will have to find a way to accommodate 30 different learning paths. The best way teachers can do this is to include as many different ways to engage with the language in their curriculum as possible. Creative writing might not be the best way to teach writing to
all students, but it might help those students who find it difficult to write in the other genres on offer. Still, actual language learning does not always go as predicted on paper. Therefore, the next chapter will review the empirical research that has been done on the effectiveness of FL creative writing so far.
3. Empirical research on FL creative writing

In theory, creative writing can stimulate language acquisition and development, writing ability, and literary competence. However, sometimes there can be a huge difference between theory and practice. Before we can wholeheartedly recommend using creative writing in language education, we need proof of its effectiveness. Documented results is one of the first things teachers ask for when considering making changes to their curriculum. This chapter therefore critically examines existing empirical research on the effects of FL creative writing. Only studies that specifically focus on creative writing in a foreign, not second, language were considered. Eight published studies met these criteria. It is safe to say that empirical research in FL creative writing is not yet a fully developed field of interest, but that does not detract from the implications these studies present. Table 1 presents an overview of the empirical studies under review in this section.

3.1 Research foci

Researchers have different reasons for investigating the benefits of creative writing. One of the most cited reasons is its ability to motivate students to engage not only with the foreign language, but with writing as well. Students’ lack of motivation is a serious problem in EFL classes all over the world, but motivation is the first step in learning anything. A teacher can only do so much if the student has no intrinsic motivation, because language is a skill learned by doing. Dai, Reimel de Carrasquel, and Tarnopolsky, from respectively China, Venezuela, and the Ukraine, set up creative writing programs to specifically address this issue among other things. Many language classes, including those in China, are still textbook-driven and focus on teaching academic and business genres, which do not always pique the interest of undergraduate students (Dai, 2006). However, universities across the world demand
increasingly higher proficiency skills in at least written English (Reimel de Carrasquel, 1998), so it is essential to find effective ways to stimulate students’ willingness to work on their writing development. In order to do this, practices in teaching EFL writing have shifted away from teaching what constitutes good writing to developing good writing practices. While this is a step in the right direction, teachers still have trouble getting their students to commit to their learning process. Considering the genres to teach writing in, creative writing better reflects the students’ interests and abilities (Tarnopolsky, 2005). Creative writing can therefore help motivate students to work on their writing skills.

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1 Not specified
Another important reason is the possibility of learning a language through writing. The goal of any foreign language class is language acquisition. Consequently, Tarnopolsky, Reimel de Carrasquel, Ensslin, Tin, Banegas, and Schultz also focus in their research on the language learning potential of creative writing. Apart from motivating students to start writing, Tarnopolsky (2005) chose creative writing because the experimental and playful way in which students engage with the language supposedly intensifies language acquisition and retention. Banegas also argues that effectively learning a foreign language does not only consist of studying the language as a system, but also requires that “learners imagine and play around with it” (2011: p. 29). Creative writing exercises can provide language learners of all levels with more opportunity for language improvement. Creative writing is additionally a good way to teach language, because writing is essential for grammar and vocabulary learning (Ennslin, 2006; Schultz, 2006). As Schultz (2006) explains, “the syntactic manipulations of poetry and its specialized vocabulary … provide students with intense lessons in grammar and vocabulary” (p. 921). Furthermore, Reimel de Carrasquel also favors creative writing over other genres of writing because it brings the students into contact with a wider variety of linguistic elements than other writing genres. Moreover, Tin (2010) argues that creative writing tasks with high formal constraints will allow the learner to practice with and acquire more complex forms of language. He does not believe the writing task should be too open-ended, because the conditions of the task force students to work directly with the foreign language, instead of merely translating their native language. This allows students to express thoughts and ideas not possible in their native language. The experimental nature of creative writing allows students to explore aspects of the language usually ignored in academically-oriented teaching.
Researchers of FL reading are also interested in creative writing. Schultz and Urlaub (2011) believe that writing can lead to the improvement of critical reading as well. Schultz (2006) argues that “coming to terms with a poetic text demands both intense decoding and interpretive reasoning” (p. 921). Reading and studying literature will therefore still lead to an improvement of critical reading skills even if the student reads a lot for other courses as well, because literary texts demand a different kind of reading. In order to write literature, students must first study literature, so reading literature will be significant part of any creative writing class. Urlaub (2011) also calls for more creative writing programs because of the positive relation between creative writing and critical reading. With any type of writing, including creative writing, the writer rewrites language and ideas that he has come across before, making reading an important part of writing. Consequently, creative writing courses will not only produce stronger writers, but also stronger readers. Even if the student does not go on to become a professional writer himself, the development of his reading abilities is reward enough, because well-developed reading skills are necessary in any type of academic course. Despite its potential to also stimulate literary understanding, current researchers are primarily interested in creative writing’s ability to motivate students, increase language acquisition and train critical reading skills. However, researchers must employ different research methods to ascertain the effectiveness of creative writing in these three areas. Each of these three benefits could warrant a separate study. In the future, researchers should investigate if participation in creative writing programs also significantly improves literary understanding. Theoretically this should be the case, but no empirical evidence is yet available.
3.2 Research methods

Even though all test groups are relatively small, the test subjects differ substantially in terms of age and language proficiency. Out of all researchers Banegas is the only one who worked with secondary school students. He worked with both beginning and advanced learners in a mainstream EFL class in Argentina. The participants of the other studies are all university students. This does not mean that the other studies are not relevant in considering implementing creative writing in secondary school programs, because university students in other countries are not necessarily further along in their acquisition of the English language than Dutch secondary school students. The participants in Dai’s, Tarnopolsky’s, and Tin’s studies are all majoring in English. Dai’s participants are 39 second-year students at the Department of English at a Chinese university. Even though their proficiency varied, all students possessed a sufficiently large vocabulary and adequate knowledge of English grammar to be able to write stories in English. Granted, this is a rather vague description of their abilities, but it indicates they have taken at least some English classes prior to participating in the study. Tarnopolsky investigated the language development of pre-intermediate English students at Dnipropetrovsk University in the Ukraine. The students in Tin’s study are 23 English majors from a private university in Indonesia, who had already completed a four-month-long English creative writing course. Their proficiency in English was somewhere between pre-intermediate and advanced. The participants of Reimel de Carrasquel’s study are the only non-language students. They are engineering and basic science students at the Simon Bolivar University in Venezuela. Even though they did not choose English as their main area of study, it would be a mistake to consider these students generally less motivated than English majors. These students often need English for very practical reasons and the opportunity to immediately apply what they have learned in real
life can be a powerful motivator. Ennslin, Urlaub and Schultz did not investigate English as a foreign language, but German and French. Ennslin worked with a group of thirteen undergraduate German language students in the United Kingdom, while Urlaub investigated three students in an advanced-level German class at Stanford University in the United States. Schultz’s participants all took part in the Intermediate French Program at the University of California in the United States. Because the test subjects differ so much, it is difficult to make general claims about which students would benefit the most from creative writing. The English proficiency of university students differs across the world, because they have not all had the same amount of exposure to the language or even the same amount of formal teaching prior to going to university. Additionally, some of these students are language students, while others come from very different departments. This also affects the potential development of their language proficiency. English majors also improve their proficiency in their other classes, so their development cannot be attributed to the creative writing course alone. Furthermore, because it is impossible to compare the results of the studies, it is yet unclear if and how the different foreign languages affect creative writing’s learning potential. Still, these studies do show that even students with a pre-intermediate proficiency in the foreign language can write creative fiction and improve their language skills by doing so. This conclusion should not be undervalued, because it legitimizes further research into this area.

The types of creative writing and the manner in which the language learners were taught also differ, but in all investigated creative writing programs the students first read literature and were formally taught about literature and creative writing before they started writing themselves. Future research could look into how the degree of instruction affects the students’ progress. The creative writing programs investigated by Dai, Ennslin, Reimel de
Carrasquel, Tarnopolsky, and Urlaub all use short stories to teach creative writing. Additionally, Dai’s, Ennslin’s and Tarnopolsky’s participants are all taught using the process approach. In Dai’s study the students were encouraged to choose their own topics to write about. This way they could write about something they were personally interested in. Students critiqued each other’s work in workshops and afterwards revised their own work and reflected on their revision. The stories were assessed by two teachers, one native speaker and one Chinese speaker of English. Ennslin’s participants wrote short stories individually or in pairs in the form of digital hypertext. The students first brainstormed in small groups, after which they wrote their stories in class. Their work was corrected by their teacher before the next class, so that students could correct and revise their work. Tarnopolsky’s students worked with short stories and psychological sketches because Tarnopolsky believes this is “the most accessible and stimulating” (2005: p. 78) form of creative writing for students with a limited language proficiency. The students were given maximum freedom in their writing. For example, they could choose their own topic, form, and style. Students received feedback on their work by both their classmates and their teacher and subsequently revised their piece. While Dai, Ennslin and Tarnopolsky all encourage the use of peer feedback, Reimel de Carrasquel and Urlaub only made use of teacher corrections. They are also the only ones to recommend grading the assignments. The activities in Reimel de Carrasquel’s study consist of writing conversations for characters in novels and writing poetry to music or paintings. The students were not entirely free in their choice of topic, but they were guided by the presented input. The activities in Urlaub’s study are similarly guided. The participants were asked to write a short creative text in response to a novel they had read and discussed in class. This will make it easier for students who are reluctant or uncomfortable with choosing their own topic, because this sometimes
means exposing a very personal side of themselves. Schultz and Tin investigated creative writing in the form of poetry. In Schultz’ study, students were given themes or keywords to write about. The program also followed a process-based approach. The students wrote their first draft at home, shared their work with three other students, and revised their work afterwards. In Tin’s study, on the other hand, the students wrote their poems in class after they were instructed and given examples. The students also had relatively little freedom in their writing, because both the form and the topic of the poem were already specified. Only Banegas used letters to teach creative writing. He also employed the process approach. The students participated in brainstorming sessions, wrote their letters in class, and gave each other feedback. Banegas also organized feedback sessions to help the students with language issues. The many differences between the creative writing programs make it difficult to make any definitive claims about the results. While Dai, Ennslin and Tarnopolsky stress the importance of free choice in topic, the others are less convinced that a more guided assignment is detrimental to the language learning experience. In fact, Tin believes that a highly constrained task will lead to an intensified language development. Additionally, unlike those investigated by Banegas, Dai, Ennslin, Schultz, and Tarnopolsky, the creative writing programs investigated by Reimel de Carrasquel, Tin, and Urlaub did not use the process approach. This might not necessarily be because they do not agree with this approach, but rather because the time available for the program was limited.

Even though the subject matter of all studies is creative writing, the manners in which they investigate the effects are different. Banegas, Reimel de Carrasquel, and Schultz base their conclusions only on their expert opinions and theoretical evidence. Banegas bases his conclusions on his experiences as an EFL teacher; Reimel de Carrasquel reviewed the creative writing activities used in the EFL literature, culture, and reading courses she taught;
and Schultz reviewed a special project in which poetry was integrated into regular language courses. The results of their studies are not so much based on documented evidence as they are on their personal opinions and experiences. Dai, Tarnopolsky, Tin and Urlaub at least use some form of informal assessment to back up their claims. Dai bases his conclusions on the students’ work and self-reflections, the teachers’ assessment, and interviews with the students and teachers. Tarnopolsky also draws on an informal analysis of the students’ work and personal interviews with the students. Tin only looked at the students’ written products and the transcripts of their discussions in class, while Urlaub also presents the students’ writing and self-reflections as evidence for his claims. However, in each case, the research data is not fully analyzed, the researchers merely point out examples to prove their points, potentially ignoring evidence that would suggest otherwise. Only Ennslin uses the results of formal testing to substantiate her claims. She analyzed the students’ written products, recorded interviews and videoed classes. She analyzed the data to assess how often the students made mistakes, which learning strategies they used, and how fluent and proficient they were in terms of vocabulary and style. Ennslin’s results are the only ones that can be used to truly back up any claims about creative writing. The general lack of formal testing makes the results of these studies highly tentative. The researchers’ bias in favor of creative writing undoubtedly influenced their report of the effects of creative writing. However, this does not mean that their results are false, merely that to be able to make truly conclusive claims about the learning potential of creative writing, more research with more formal types of testing needs to be done. Because of the vast differences in participants, teaching methods, and assessment methods, it is difficult to group these studies together to make any definitive claims about creative writing. Consequently, the results of these studies should be regarded as they are presented, namely tentatively.
3.3 Results

One of the most important results is the improvement in language proficiency, especially in terms of vocabulary. Because students have to choose their words more carefully to express their ideas in creative writing than in other genres, students come into contact with a larger variety of vocabulary and retain the words they learn more easily (Reimel de Carrasquel, 1998). Dai also noticed that writing, revising, and giving feedback made the students more aware of themselves as writers and the importance of conscious use of vocabulary. This proved to be one of the biggest motivators for language acquisition; students actively sought out words they needed to express themselves. In addition to a larger and more sophisticated vocabulary, Tarnopolsky, Tin, and Ennslin also found evidence that grammatical competence increased. Tarnopolsky found improvement in the use of vocabulary and language structures, and the students’ writing contained fewer language errors. He also observed that when the writing assignments increased in difficulty, language proficiency first deteriorated, because the students paid more attention to what they wanted to say than to language form. However, after the initial relapse, students quickly reached a level of proficiency higher than before. This proves that students should be encouraged to make mistakes and should not always be penalized for it. Moreover, Tin found evidence that the high formal constraints of the creative writing assignments led students to use the language more creatively than they would have had need to in an open-ended exercise. Students were forced to use vocabulary and grammatical structures they might not yet have been familiar with in order to complete the task; the constraints lead students to acquire and master specific language forms. Ennslin’s data indicates that students’ grammatical competence increased in a continuous manner. This contradicts Tarnopolsky’s observation of relapses in proficiency. Ennslin’s and Tarnopolsky’s test groups
are too small to make any conclusive arguments about that right now. Ennslin’s results also show that students’ lexical and stylistic skills improved. The students became increasingly more willing to experiment with language and to express ideas in literary language. For example, students used more advanced vocabulary and sophisticated style in the second half of the project. Most students also felt they had become more competent and more confident in speaking the language spontaneously. Confidence leads to more practice and more practice leads to more confidence. It is important for all language students to achieve this type of mindset. Similar to the participants in Ennslin’s study, Schultz’s students also developed their oral skills through brainstorming and giving feedback to their classmates. Language should never exclude one productive skill in favor of the other; speaking and writing go hand in hand. Because of the limited scope of the studies and the generally informal assessment of the effects of the creative writing classes, these results do not prove without a doubt that creative writing will improve language proficiency. However, it shows that it is possible. Research into foreign language creative writing is still in an early stage, but these results encourage further research into the effectiveness of using creative writing to teach language.

As predicted, it also appears that motivation and writing and reading skills improved. Tarnopolsky is the only one to report on an actual increase in the students’ commitment. When the students started to see their writing as a way to express themselves, they were more interested and enthusiastic about the assignments. Urlaub’s results also suggest that the students’ motivation to engage with the text increased. This does not mean that the participants in the other studies did not find creative writing motivating, only that their attitudes were not well documented. This highlights the importance of proper testing. It would be interesting to correlate the improvement in motivation with the students’ writing
development to determine how big the effect of motivation is on language learning. Tarnopolsky does observe an improvement in the students’ writing abilities. For example, the students showed more coherence and cohesion in their writing and their pieces were more polished and sophisticated. Tarnopolsky argues that while actually enjoying writing, the students are more willing to create a piece of text that showcases their ability and of which they can be proud. Additionally, there is evidence to support that creative writing improves literary reading. Urlaub shows that the students working with literature in creative writing classes became more aware of the literariness of the texts. Seeing texts not only as something that has to be read, but as something that has been written, students develop an appreciation for the skills writers need to create such texts. Unfortunately, effects other than language improvement are more difficult to observe and test. More in depth studies are needed to determine creative writing’s precise influence on motivation and reading and writing abilities. It is clear that there is evidence of improvement in students’ language and literary skills. However, it must be said that participants who did not show any significant improvements have been most likely glossed over. These studies focus mainly on the positive effects of creative writing and are therefore fairly biased. They do not yet conclusively prove that creative writing will be an effective and efficient language learning tool in mainstream EFL classrooms. Larger-scale research will be needed to test that hypothesis.

3.4 Discussions and conclusions

Basing their findings primarily on their expert opinions and theoretical evidence, Banegas, Reimel de Carrasquel, and Schultz are all thoroughly convinced of the benefits of creative writing. Banegas and Schultz conclude that creative writing encourages using language
creatively and stimulates language improvement in both beginning and more advanced
learners. Reimel de Carrasquel also concludes that creative writing is highly motivating. It
takes place in a safe environment that, contrary to more academically-oriented writing
courses, allows students to make mistakes. Creative writing additionally encourages
students to use language in their own way, expanding their knowledge of the language.
Reimel de Carrasquel further argues that motivated students have a more positive attitude
towards writing which will benefit the learning process. Even though there is theoretical
evidence that back up their assertions, further research is needed to prove their claims,
because there was no formal testing involved and the work of the students was not
thoroughly and objectively analyzed. As teachers and experts in the field, their experience
with creative writing should not be ignored or dismissed, but we cannot base any general
claims about the effects of creative writing on theory and opinions alone.

Backed up by their informal assessments, Dai, Tarnopolsky, and Tin are a little more
cautiously optimistic about creative writing as an addition to language education. The initial
results of Dai’s empirical study show that FL creative writing can motivate students to write,
improve students’ proficiency, and encourage critical thinking. However, Dai does note that
in the future more emphasis could be placed on linguistic accuracy. Nonetheless, this does
not mean that the course did not improve students’ grammatical accuracy and vocabulary;
only that the student’s level of English could still be improved. This research project is still in
an early stage, so more research data needs to be gathered in the coming years to shed
further light on the effects of creative writing. Tarnopolsky suggests that creative writing
teaches the students the subtlety and nuances of the language. He recommends creative
writing for every future language professional. However, he does point out that as language
students, the participants were already motivated to improve their language proficiency. As
mentioned earlier, many secondary school students do not study the language by choice. They might not benefit as much from creative writing classes. Tin concludes that more freedom of choice in writing will perhaps lead to improved motivation, but not necessarily to higher language competence. On the contrary, stricter formal constraints stimulate students to use more complex and creative language. Students need to be challenged to use language unfamiliar to them before they can master it. Additionally, Urlaub tentatively suggests that a positive mutual relation between creative writing and literary reading exists. Even though he recognizes that the conclusions he draws from his research are preliminary, he believes that creative writing can be an effective way for some students to improve their literary reading skills. However, Urlaub does warn that not all students felt comfortable with the creative assignments. Creative writing’s personal nature can be an advantage and a disadvantage at the same time. Additionally, students might fail to recognize the point of the exercises, so teachers need to make the link between writing and reading explicit. Though still being primarily positive, these studies paint a more nuanced picture of creative writing’s learning potential. The overall results are still positive, but they also acknowledge that these results might not hold for all types of students.

Being the only one to having analyzed the written products of the students in great detail, Ennslin concludes that creative writing can, on the one hand, stimulate motivation and confidence, and on the other, improve grammatical competence. She attributes the improvements to various factors, primarily to pair work, peer review, and the students’ motivation. However, Ennslin is also critical of her own results. She notes that as language students, the participants were already highly motivated to learn German and were of an intermediate or even advanced level. Ennslin also points out that the improvement could not be attributed to the creative writing project alone, because the students took other
language courses at the same time. Additionally, students who worked in pairs generally paid less attention to form in favor of content. So while collaborative writing increases motivation, the teacher has to make sure that students receive sufficient feedback on their work. Ennslin’s study shows that creative writing can positively affect language proficiency and the learning experience. However, these students were already motivated and had reached at least an intermediate level of proficiency. Further studies would have to show if students who are not as motivated to learn a foreign language can achieve the same results. However, this does stress the importance of measuring motivation and distinguishing participants according to their motivation to learn. It makes sense that motivated students learn faster, but it is yet unclear whether creative writing has the power to motivate those students who could not be motivated by anything else. As supporters of creative writing, the researchers of the studies under review might have been inclined to focus only the students who have improved during the creative writing courses and overgeneralize the positive effects of creative writing. However, even if they cannot say with absolute certainty which students would benefit from creative writing, they still have proven that it is possible for creative writing courses to lead to improved language competence and increased motivation.

To conclude, relatively little research has yet been done into the effects of FL creative writing. The studies that have looked into the potential benefits are primarily preliminary and are not based on thorough analyses of the participants’ progress. It is also impossible to group the results of the studies together, because they differ too much in terms of participants and research methods. Most participants were language students and actively interested in improving their proficiency. It stands to reason that these students’ are more
willing to put in the effort to develop their language skills than students whose primary goal is to pass a required course. Additionally, creative writing encompasses a wide range of forms, genres, and techniques. It would be short-sighted to disregard the difference between them. Further research is needed to determine which kind of creative writing is most suitable for the development of which language skill. However, the results of the studies are still encouraging. Even though not every participant exhibited the same degree of improvement, creative writing did contribute positively to students’ motivation and linguistic and literary competence. Future research will have to show if and to which extent less-motivated and less-proficient students will benefit from creative writing and how to maximize the effects in these students. However, creative writing’s worth becomes irrelevant if it is not possible to introduce the genre into existing language and writing programs. The next chapter will therefore examine the feasibility of implementing creative writing into FL education in the Netherlands.
4. Implementing creative writing in the Netherlands

On paper creative writing is a great addition to any FL writing program. There is even empirical proof that some students’ language abilities improve significantly from taking creative writing classes. However, there is also the issue of implementing the teaching method into existing educational programs. In the Netherlands, secondary education is regulated by the government. There are rules and requirements every school has to adhere to. Additionally, teachers need to be willing and able to teach creative writing competently. Without a capable teacher, every creative writing program will surely fail. In general, writing creatively is not something every teacher feels equipped to deal with. They need not only knowledge about creative writing, but also about teaching it. Creative writing is also a skill learned by practice. Any teacher would need a certain amount of experience with the genre before attempting to teach it. This chapter examines these key issues to conclude whether or not it is feasible to successfully introduce creative writing in secondary education in the Netherlands.

4.1 The exam program

As a result of the reforms of the second phase of secondary education in the Netherlands schools now have the opportunity to use different teaching methods to prepare their students for their final exams, including the use of creative writing as a tool for language learning. In 2007, the Dutch government radically reformed the second phase of secondary education by introducing a series of far-reaching changes in order to deregulate the exam program (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2005). Firstly, teachers and school administration now have more to say about how they want to teach their subjects. For example, literature can be part of the foreign language programs or it can be taught as a
separate subject. Secondly, there are fewer learning outcomes specified in the exam program. The learning outcomes are also less specific than before, allowing schools more freedom in how to interpret them. Thirdly, the form of school exams is no longer regulated. This means schools can decide which type of assessment they wish to use to test their students’ abilities. In the Netherlands the exam program of modern foreign languages, which includes English, consists of two parts: the national exam and the school exams. The national exam only tests reading ability; the school exam tests all other skills, including writing and literary competence. The Board of Examinations is responsible for making the national exams, which are mandatory for all students; SLO, the national institute for curriculum development, is responsible for formulating the learning outcomes for the school exams, but not for actually making exams. SLO publishes guides with advice and suggestions on how to teach and test subjects, but schools are not obligated to follow their instructions. This means that, if they so wish, schools are allowed to use creative writing to test writing ability and literary competence as long as the students’ tests prove they meet the learning outcomes.

In spite of this, the learning outcomes for writing and literature do not include or refer to creative writing as they are now. They include more general descriptors, such as “The candidate can present gathered information adequately with regards to goal and audience, and describe things and people and express feelings and articulate points of view” and “The candidate can recognize and distinguish literary text types, and use literary terms in interpreting literary texts” (Meijer & Fasoglio, 2007, p. 119, translation mine) (see appendix B for all descriptors in the exam program). The learning outcomes are linked to the levels of language proficiency as specified in Taalprofieelen (Liemergh & Meijer, 2004), the official Dutch adaptation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEF) (COE, 2001a). The target level for writing is level B1 for HAVO students and level B2 for VWO
students (Meijer & Fasoglio, 2007). As mentioned before, teachers are not required to use a particular method of teaching or assessment, but they must be able to demonstrate how their teaching program leads to the target level. In a sense, the second phase of secondary education has become somewhat of a free market. Schools now have the opportunity to distinguish themselves from other schools in order to attract more students. They can offer all kinds of special programs to better serve the needs of their students. School administrations can now adopt more progressive attitudes toward teaching and learning to set themselves apart from other schools. Education in the Netherlands might be regulated by the government, but schools still compete with each other for students. Creative writing, as part of regular English or literature classes or as a stand-alone program, can offer schools the competitive advantage they need. In short, as long as they work towards the globalized learning outcomes and the appropriate CEF level, schools can now implement, guide, and shape didactic reform relatively easily themselves. This allows schools the opportunity to implement creative writing as an addition to their foreign language and literature programs to distinguish themselves from other schools.

4.2 The Common European Framework of Reference

Creative writing is recognized by the CEF as an important mode of writing and including it in school curriculums means exposing students to a more comprehensive range of writing activities. Essentially, the CEF is a tool to map learners’ language competence and development. The Council of Europe designed the framework to encourage collaboration between the different educational systems across Europe. The framework provides descriptors, so called “can-do statements” (CEO, 2001a, p. 244), for five different language skills: reading, listening and watching, interaction, speaking, and writing. The descriptors are
divided into six levels, with A1 being the lowest and C2 the highest. There are different theories of language learning, but the CEF defines language learning as “what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively” (COE, 2001a, p. 1). In other words, the focus has shifted away from language knowledge in favor of language competence. Students are judged on what they can do in the foreign language, not on their language accuracy. Consequently, competences such as vocabulary and grammar play a more supporting role and should not be the main criteria in assessments. The CEF does provide detailed descriptors for these competences, but up till level B2, the margin of error in, for example, writing is still relatively high (COE, 2001b). A student who tries to write more complicated and sophisticated pieces but makes mistakes will be considered more proficient than a student who writes simple texts perfectly. According to this approach, even students with small vocabularies and weak grammatical knowledge can start practicing creative writing, because the goal is effective communication, not perfect language proficiency. It does not matter if their writing is not free of mistakes as long as they try to communicate their message and challenge themselves to try increasingly complicated language. A language is learned by trial and error and teachers have to be careful not to discourage beginning students by focusing too heavily on the mistakes they make. Instead teachers need to make students aware of language learning as an activity. Teachers have to take their students’ limited language proficiency into account, but it is not impossible to create assignments where even these students are stimulated to use their language inventively and creatively.

Despite not being given the same consideration as in other countries, creative writing is still recognized in the Netherlands as an important type of writing. According to the CEF,
creative writing constitutes a large part of writing activities; the framework only distinguishes between two types of writing: creative writing and writing reports and essays. Creative writing does not only include the writing of fiction, but the two-way distinction does show the importance of creative writing in language learning. Liembergh and Mijer, on the other hand, do not attribute such an important role to creative writing in the official Dutch adaptation of the CEF, *Taalprofielen* (2004). They distinguish between four types of writing activities: correspondence; notes, messages and forms; reports and essays; and free writing. Free writing does come close to what the CEF calls creative writing, but it includes only one descriptor that involves the writing of fiction, the B1 descriptor “can write a story” (Liembergh & Meijer, 2004, p. 144, *translation mine*). Nonetheless, according to the CEF, the writing of fiction is something that can be learned from level A2 onwards, starting with “can write a simple poem about people” (COE, 2001b, p. 23). Students in the Netherlands should reach A2 level for writing at the end of the first phase of secondary education (Trimbos, 2007). In other words, students should be proficient enough to write creatively when they enter the second phase. Creative writing, whether that be the writing of fiction or otherwise, is a principal part of writing and not teaching it would be an oversight. Since even beginning language learners should be capable of producing creative language, there is no reason not to start with creative writing assignments at the beginning of the second phase. Even though the genre seems less important according in the Dutch adaptation, teachers can still refer to the original CEF to justify creative writings’ place in their lesson plans.

### 4.3 Literature education

Creative writing assignments can also be used to individualize literature programs to accommodate the vast differences in literary competence between students. Literature is a
compulsory part of the school exam of modern foreign languages in the Netherlands. The
Dutch government recognizes the educational value of literature, because it not only
“protects the cultural heritage, but it also stimulates intellectual, moral and esthetic
reflection” (Meijer & Fasoglio, 2007, p. 56, translation mine). The learning outcomes
concerning literature have not been linked to CEF descriptors. Literary texts are only
included at the C level in the CEF and students in the Netherlands are not required to
achieve that level. Additionally, teachers have been granted more freedom in how they wish
to assess literary competence, because the reading portfolio is no longer mandatory.
Consequently, each school can decide how to assess literary competence on its own and
there are vast differences across the country. Using creative writing to determine literary
competence would result in a more comprehensive assessment of literary knowledge and
skills, because it challenges the student to approach literature from another perspective.

Even though every English teacher has to teach literature, research has shown that in
the Netherlands only few feel up to the task (Witte, 2006). Students enter the second phase
with wildly varying degrees of literary competence. About half of them enter the second
phase with a level of competence below what they should have reached at the end of the
first phase (Witte, 2006). The choice of literary texts and types of assignments are incredibly
important for keeping students motivated, but it is impossible to accommodate the
differences in competence with one general lesson plan. SLO recommends offering many
different types of assignments and letting students choose their own assignments to
improve motivation (Meijer & Fasoglio, 2007). In this regard, creative writing assignments
can be a useful addition to the program. However, teachers should take care to offer
assignments of appropriate difficulty and less creative students should always have the
option to choose other types of assignments.
The types of creative writing assignments and which literary text teachers should offer as input depends on the students’ literary competence. Witte (2005, 2006) distinguishes six stages of literary competences. For each stage, Witte identifies reading ability and which type of book, assignment, and teaching approach suits the student best. Students in the first two stages still read children’s literature and often have difficulty interpreting the text. Creative writing assignments for these students should therefore mainly focus on understanding the text. Students in the second two stages are able to read and interpret simple literary texts and they can recognize and understand simple narrative techniques. Assignments for these students can focus on the formal aspects of the text. Students in the last two stages are able to read complex literary texts and appreciate complex narrative structures, symbolism, stylistic sophistication, and intertextuality. Assignments for these students should challenge the students to fully explore writing styles and conventions and the place of the text in a broader context. Ideally, the teacher would offer a tailor-made program for each student, but this is impossible considering the large number of students he has to teach and the few contact hours he has to get to know his students (Witte, 2005). Still, recognizing the fact that each student goes through these stages will encourage teachers to set up more differentiated programs. In short, when using creative writing assignments in literature classes or teaching creative writing as a separate subject, teachers should take into account that students from all levels of literary competence will be put together in one class and that they should offer texts and assignments on different levels to accommodate those differences. Luckily, creative writing assignments can be personalized relatively easily, not only in terms of input, but also of type of assignments. If a teacher preselects small groups of appropriate texts and assignments for different competence levels, students can be granted the freedom to mix and match their
own lesson plan. However, accurately determining the students’ literary proficiency is key in this strategy and should not be taken lightly. Students can only improve their literary skills if they are offered texts and assignments at the right level.

### 4.4 Task-based education

In order to be most effective, creative writing assignments should be designed as tasks. The task-based approach to language learning is promoted in the CEF (COE, 2001a), Taalprofielen (Liembergh & Meijer, 2004) and SLO’s guide to modern foreign languages (Meijer & Fasoglio, 2007), because tasks are ideally suited for communicative language education. As said before, current trends in language pedagogy focus on language competence, instead of language knowledge. What is important is not how much the student knows, but what he can do with the language. The only way to improve language competence is to use it for real communication, because language is, in its very essence, communication. To improve language abilities instead of only building knowledge, assignments must be communicative in nature, meaningful, and authentic and tasks are just that. The CEF defines tasks as “the strategic activation of specific competences in order to carry out a set of purposeful actions in a particular domain with a clearly defined goal and a specific outcome” (COE, 2001a: p. 157). In other words, language tasks are what you do when you want to communicate with someone about something. It brings the real world into the artificiality of the classroom setting. Designing creative writing as tasks will accelerate the students’ improvement of their communicative abilities and will help them see the use of the exercises, reducing their possible reluctance to commit themselves to the assignment.

The primary goal of task-based language education is always the completion of the communicative goal, not perfect language proficiency. When designing creative writing
tasks, teachers should keep in mind that tasks “actively involve learners in meaningful communication, are relevant ..., are challenging but feasible, and have identifiable ... outcomes” (p. 158). Performance is ultimately judged on “meaning, [as well as] form, fluency and accuracy” (p. 158), but the effectiveness of a text can be graded nonetheless. This means that peer or teacher feedback should not only point out grammatical and lexical errors and mistakes. Students can learn to write without mistakes, but this in itself will not make them better writers. To help the student truly move to the next stage of language competence, feedback must also focus on their writing as a text and its effectiveness as such. The way the reader receives and interprets a text is only in part determined by the presence or absence of language errors. Only when learners are challenged to communicate their thoughts and feelings more precisely will students become intrinsically motivated to improve their language skills.

Teachers take on a facilitating role in task-based learning. Teachers should teach students the strategies they need to activate the necessary language competences to accomplish the task. Students need to learn to plan, execute, monitor, and repair their writing efficiently and effectively. Consequently, task-based assignments are ideal for teachers who use the process approach to teach writing. They are not teachers in the traditional sense of the word. They enable the students to learn independently and autonomously, instead of focusing on transferring knowledge. Creative writing’s open-ended nature can offer students much freedom in how to accomplish the task. However, teachers can easily adapt the degree of guidance a task offers. On the one hand, too much freedom can discourage students from starting with the assignment, but on the other hand choices stimulate critical thinking, increasing not only motivation, but also independent learning. It makes students accept more responsibility for their own learning process (Meijer & Fasoglio,
This means that task-based education fits well within classroom environments that value autonomous learning. Task-based education is a different way to approach teaching. It starts with the student and is designed to guide the student through the learning process, while still allowing the student to learn at his own pace. For teachers who struggle to offer more personalized education to large groups of students at the same time, tasks can be a welcome solution.

### 4.5 Implementation issues

Even though change usually occurs top-down or bottom-up, change in education must come from all sides, because it is a field with a diverse set of tightly interconnected stakeholders. On the one hand, the EU, through the CEF, has already recognized creative writing, including but not limited to the writing of fiction from level A2 onwards, as a major type of writing next to essays and reports. Liembergh and Meijer, representing the Dutch government, on the other hand, decided to place free writing next to essays and reports in their adaptation of the CEF with only a single descriptor for fiction writing on B1. Even though we can say Dutch policy makers recognize the value of creative fiction writing, they do not actively encourage its use in the classroom. Yet, it takes the government years to implement reform in education, so they are not the most effective means for implementing creative writing. Nevertheless, with the official recognition of creative fiction writing as an important form of writing and the room the government has granted teachers to make changes in the way they teach, there are no official constraints in the way of using creative writing in language and literature teaching.

However, not all current teachers will feel comfortable teaching creative writing, since it is not a genre they have a lot of experience with. Teachers will need extra training to
develop their knowledge of and skills in this new genre. Just as the students will need to learn by doing, so do the teachers. A possible solution is to attract professional writers to teach creative writing classes. They already possess the necessary experience in the genre, but they might not know how to share their knowledge in a didactically justified way or how to guide others in their writing process. Only teachers with experience in writing or writers with experience in teaching can successfully teach creative writing classes.

Still, even if teachers would want to use creative writing in their classes, the first thing they would need is teaching materials. As Kwakernaak (2009) explains, change in the classroom is usually initiated by educational publishers. However, publishers are in a difficult position. They work for commercial companies and as such they are always looking for ways to improve their products to increase their sales. At the same time, though, they do not want to change their textbooks too radically in fear of losing their more traditional customers. In general, teachers are critical and skeptical customers. They are not easily swayed by trends or fads. Publishers need to be able to justify any and every change they make to their teaching materials. If they were to give creative writing a more prominent position in their teaching materials, they would need sufficient proof of its effectiveness to convince teachers and school administrations. Additionally, as said before, most teachers would need to be trained in creative writing themselves. They would need to feel sufficiently confident that they can teach this genre, before they can teach a successful program. Therefore, publishers need to take into account the teachers’ widely varying degrees of experience with the genre in developing teaching materials. The teaching materials will need to be accessible not only to students, but to the teachers as well. A significant amount of teachers must first ask for certain changes before publishers will include major innovations.
in their materials, but teachers will only want to use creative writing in their classes if they have proof that their students would respond well to it.

Yet, the days that the teacher alone decided how he taught his subject are long gone. The influence of the school administration has grown considerably since the government has given schools more freedom in the way they teach (Kwakernaak, 2009). The administration can now decide to either approach teaching in a traditional or in a more progressive way, depending on demands from students and parents. Even though they are not completely without influence, teachers will have to conform to the views and values of the school they work for. In reality, willing teachers have to work together with the other teachers in their department to convince the school administration of the changes they want to make. This can be a slow and bureaucratic process. The more objective evidence and effective teaching aids available, the easier it will be to persuade anyone of the benefits of adding creative writing to the curriculum. In short, to facilitate the implementation of creative writing, publishers need to be convinced to position creative writing as an integral part of their teaching materials and introduce teachers and school administrations to the benefits, while at the same time both teachers and school administrations need to be persuaded to demand from publishers that creative writing is included in their teaching materials.

Summarizing, there are no official regulations hindering the implementation of creative writing in secondary education in the Netherlands. Not only is it possible, the leading forces shaping language education in the Netherlands either encourage creative writing, recommend adding creative writing to the curriculum or at least do not discourage its use. Creative writing can be used in language classes, as well as in literature classes. Shaped as tasks, creative writing can help students develop their linguistic and literary competence at
their own pace on their own level. It is a workable answer to the growing call for more personalized education. However, without the support from teachers, no new teaching tool will ever succeed. Teachers need to be convinced that creative writing will produce tangible results and more empirical proof than is now available is needed. Most teachers will need to be schooled in the art of creative writing before they will be able to teach it, because creative writing is likely a genre glossed over or skipped all together during their own education and training. It is also possible to approach professional writers to become teachers instead. Ideally, a creative writing program would be managed by a team of both teachers and writers. Additionally, teaching materials for creative writing classes will need to be developed. Of course it is possible for teachers to create their own, but many teachers prefer to work with existing materials instead of reinventing the wheel themselves. Nowadays, many teachers do not have the time to develop a lesson plan from scratch. Instead seeing these issues as problems, they could be regarded as opportunities for teachers, writers, publishers, and researchers to work together in developing successful creative writing programs.
5. Conclusion

It is too early to say we need to introduce creative writing in all EFL language and literature classes in the second phase of secondary education in the Netherlands. Nonetheless, the results so far warrant further investigation of the topic. To make any statistically valid claims, we need larger scale studies. To be able to use creative writing effectively in language education, we need to know precisely how it affects the language acquisition of different types of students. Students in the Netherlands are grouped together based on a general level of academic competence. However, students take courses in many different fields and students who excel in a particular subject can end up with classmates who are there only because they are obligated to take the course. Teachers will have to accommodate for such difference in ability and motivation. Empirical research will have to provide answers to questions such as, will creative writing be beneficial to all students; how does initial motivation to learn the language determine the student’s success in the program; which language skills are developed by writing prose and which by poetry; and how often do students need to write fiction to book any significant results? As said before, researchers, teachers, publishers, and writers should work together in setting up these research programs. They all approach the subject from a different point of view and they could profit from sharing their knowledge about both teaching creative writing and researching and testing its possible effects.

There are a number of factors that should be kept in mind when setting up future studies. Researchers need to create as homogenous test groups as possible to be able to interpret any results successfully. This means grouping students together based on factors such as initial proficiency, motivation, and possible contact with the language outside the
study. In regular language classes, students’ proficiency levels vary significantly, especially their literary proficiency. Researchers should take these differences into account when selecting their participants. In some cases it would be best to divide a class into multiple groups or to exclude some students from the study if their relevant characteristics differ too much from the rest of the group. In addition, they need to monitor the students’ language development by testing their participants’ skills at least before and after the study and preferably during the study as well. Only by testing an entire group the same way can researchers make any claims, positive or negative, about the effects of creative writing. Test scores can provide solid evidence of improvement caused by the creative writing program. Furthermore, teachers and publishers need to work with professional writers to devise the best way of teaching creative writing. Teaching creative writing to train language skills calls for a different approach than when it is used to improve literary understanding. The teaching objectives should not only be measurable; they should also be specific and attainable. However, just what would be attainable depends on the participants. It helps to have a teacher who is familiar with the participants involved with developing the program. On the one hand, if the initial level of the program is too high, students will be overwhelmed and discouraged at the start. On the other hand, if the program is not challenging enough, students cannot be expected to improve.

Creative writing in a foreign language is a relatively new field of interest in language learning. Research done so far is promising and creative writing could possibly be a solution to solving motivation and diversification problems in EFL classes. Creative writing offers a world of possibilities. It can be funny, it can be clever, or it can be beautiful. It can make you think, it can make you feel or it can make you forget. Writing can take your message and send it off
into the world. Language is alive and it is always about life. Language learners need to take
possession of the language by using it for saying the things they want to say, because what it
means to speak a language is to make it your own and becoming partly responsible for its
form and use in real life. Creative writing can return a bit of the real world to the closed-off
world of textbook-driven classrooms.
Appendix A

Survey creative writing in Dutch secondary schools

In order to get an idea of the status of creative writing in secondary schools in the Netherlands, I sent out a survey to twenty secondary school English teachers to ask about their experiences with the topic.

Participants

The teachers all work for Noordhoff Publishing where they develop teaching materials and aids. I chose this group because they are actively interested in teaching methods and are therefore more likely to experiment with new ways to teach their subject. Most of the teachers work in the east of the Netherlands at middle and large secondary schools and they teach at all levels of secondary education. However, this survey was not intended to form a representative image for all English classes in the Netherlands, but to find evidence of the use of creative writing.

Questions

The survey was sent out via email and asked if they ever used creative writing in their classes, if there were other programs or projects at school that included creative writing, and if they knew of any students who write creatively in their free time.

Results

Out of the twenty teachers, eight responded. Seven teachers use creative writing assignments in their classes, but most of them only use such assignments a couple a times a year. These assignments include rewriting stories or endings of stories and writing poems,
love letters, fairy tales, horror stories, and diary entries. Most teachers pointed out that it is something mostly done from year three onwards, usually at the higher levels. One teacher indicated that at his school students regularly write screenplays for the drama club. Those plays are then also performed. There was also one teacher who knew of two girls who regularly write English fan fiction (stories about original works, which not only include written fiction, but also television programs and video games) and publish their stories online.
Appendix B

Exam program modern foreign languages

Domain D: Writing ability

D1: Language skills

5. The candidate can:

- respond adequately in written contact with target language users;
- request and give information;
- adequately present gathered information considering goal and audience, describe things or people, express feelings, and substantiate points of view;
- write a report.

D2: Strategic skills

6. The candidate can:

- write a text with the aid of a word processor;
- write a text with the aid of (electronic) reference material.

Domain E: Literature

E1: Literary development

7. The candidate can write a substantiated report about his reading experience of at least three literary texts.

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8. The candidate can recognize and distinguish literary text types and apply literary terminology when interpreting literary texts.

9. The candidate can give an overview of the outlines of literary history and place the read literary texts in this historical perspective.
References


Reimel de Carrasquel, S. Creative Writing: A Resource for Increasing Over-all Foreign Or Second Language Proficiency. TESL Reporter 31(2), 11-20.


