Short fiction writing in English by Chinese university students: An integrated F-A-I-T-H approach

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How do Chinese university students use English in creative ways to 'write truly' while describing something fictional or 'untrue'?

Introduction

When delivering a speech at a meeting of the Writers' Congress, Ernest Hemingway said as a fiction writer:

> A writer's problem does not change. He himself changes, but his problem remains the same. It is always how to write truly and having found what is true, to project it in such a way that it becomes part of the experience of the person who reads it. (1937)

Does this statement still ring true today? If it does, what approach should and can be taken for Chinese university students to write 'truly' during their fiction writing workshops in English when they know what they try to accomplish is indeed something fictional or self-evidently 'untrue'? What characterises the main thematic and stylistic elements of Chinese students' short stories written in English as creative outcomes?

This article presents F-A-I-T-H as a feasible integrated approach to L2 creative writing practice that I have developed to facilitate postgraduate and undergraduate short fiction writing workshops in English at Beijing International Studies University (BISU) for more than 10 years (i.e. Fictionality, Ambiguity, Intertextuality, Tellability, and Hybridity). The F-A-I-T-H approach is on the whole a student-centred and outcome-based one, with each of its elements systematically performing an indispensible function – the notion of fictionality inspires Chinese students to look both into and beyond reality while creating stories in English; the notion of ambiguity prepares them for the subtlety and

multivalence of literary creation; the notion of intertextuality broadens their vision to establish connections between and among literary texts; the practice of tellability trains them to find their own voices of L2 narration; the practice of hybridity empowers them to mingle various raw materials into completed fiction. Theoretically, the F-A-I-T-H approach accords with 'a dynamic linguistic relativism, recognizing as axiomatic the notions of variation and change'. (Crystal, 1999: 20) Practically, it attempts to articulate the rationales and methods of enabling Chinese students to:

(1) recreate deeper realities/truths through fiction writing in English;

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(2) reconsider the ambiguous nature of fiction for the essential purposes of self-expression and multivalent narration;

(3) revive the rich fiction-writing traditions so as to reconnect multiple cultures and texts, and renew fictional characters, settings, images, speeches, and actions;

(4) recollect and reform complicated, seemingly inscrutable human experiences into tellable, understandable short stories that might be shared by many readers through the global medium of English;

(5) reshape and refresh their individual fictional narratives based on the present-day fashion of hybridity by using China English (a.k.a. Chinese English) – just when 'China English is slowly moving towards phase two' (Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002: 270) – in the process of going through the three phases of the development of non-native models proposed by B. B. Kachru: 'non-recognition, development of varieties within a variety, and recognition'. (1992: 56–57)

Fictionality

Teaching short fiction writing in English at BISU, I tend to regard fictionality as being almost synonymous with creativity itself. According to J. J. A. Mooij, 'the nature of narrative fictionality consists in the construction and presentation of a set of intentional objects, forming a complex whole which is separated from what we take reality to be, on the understanding that this construction and presentation involves the telling of a story.' (1993: 93) Fictionality, as clearly described here, manifests at least three features conducive to English education in a Chinese setting, namely, artistic creativity, transcendent reality, and experiential totality. During weekly workshops of short fiction writing in English, my Chinese students learn about the essential skills of 'the telling of a story' in a foreign language, so as to actively create their personal artistic utterances, and eventually benefit from creative English education as a type of holistic education – the education of the tongue, of the eye, of the hand, of the mind, and of the heart.

To begin with, what my students learn in class centres round the well established scholarly notion of fictionality. They get to know about the creative role of imagination in fiction writing as being 'responsible for the creation of spheres of unreality which interact with spheres of reality' (Mooij, 1993: 1); they read extensively to agree that 'the idea that fictional literature may be a vehicle of general truth occurs in different shapes in different parts of the world' (Rossholm, 2014: 227); they tend to draw inspiration from fiction of various kinds as 'the work of a language that has gone on an eternal pilgrimage, the work of differed communications and polyvalences conceived as seeds' (Kupchik, 2014: 290).

In their fiction writing endeavours, my Chinese students welcome the opportunities to create/ recreate alternative make-believe worlds seriously in English, and to make imaginative connections between factuality and fictionality, between outer reality and inner reality, between the down-to-earth and the transcendent. Their abilities to comprehend the concept of fictionality and to write short fiction in English by themselves even go well beyond my own expectations as their teacher. For instance, Student A combines the elements of science fiction with those of detective fiction to complete her own sophisticated story 'The missing finger' set in 2050; Student B, in her narrative 'The crossroads', employs both the techniques of supernaturalism and those of magical realism to show the death-defying love of a son for his father, a lorry driver; Student C mixes the know-hows of artificial intelligence, geology, and astronomy with human intuitions and aspirations to tell his tale 'The earth: lost and found', which dramatises the joint efforts of humans and robots to search for a new home.

Ambiguity

If it is true that 'human communication embraces the opposing tendencies of clarity and ambiguity' (Meltzer & Meltzer, 2008: 152), I believe, it is also true that good fiction is at its core ambiguous, or multivalent in meaning, and tells truth obliquely, not presenting reality superficially, but representing reality deeply – it is unreal in the sense that it is not a mechanical imitation of the particular facts of reality, but a subtle, vivid manifestation of the innate principles of reality; it is real in the sense that it offers suggestive clues to the various possible implications of reality. Just as Ming Dong Gu observes, 'Words are *not* transparent panes. A fictional work's language is not just a medium for carrying the intended meanings and significance of the author. The windowpanes are opaque and are inscribed with designs that are noticeable only through textual analysis.' (2014: 212) Those metaphorical and critical remarks of Gu's stress the non-transparency, indirection, and roundaboutness of fiction.

In class, my students learn to explore fictional ambiguity as literary multivalence, or as a kind of autotelism, knowing that the central meaning of a fictional work is justifiably ambiguous, for it is outside the work itself, or beyond the literal sense of the work, and that what is the most important in a short story is not what is directly told but what is indirectly shown, not what is denoted on surface but what is connoted in depth, and not what is explicitly clarified but what is implicitly hinted. Further, they pay close attention to a more inclusive idea that 'the basic origins of ambiguity lie in the fact that all human languages must use finite vocabularies to indicate an infinite number of possible referents' (Meltzer & Meltzer, 2008: 158). My students make efforts to establish in their own fiction writing processes many an imaginary 'atmosphere' or 'environment', where 'a cloud, a color, a name, a bell, are so much more than just a cloud, a color, a name or a bell' (Kupchik, 2014: 290), and where meaning may emerge from feeling, theme from imagery, and truth from ambiguity – Student D, for example, portrays the innocent-looking white rabbit, Dick, as an impulsive serial killer during the animals' sports meet; Student E depicts the mother wolf as having a humane heart; Student F creates a group of Chinese migrant workers as contemporary flesh-and-blood characters who have self-contradictory desires of escaping from or staying in their homeland.

Intellectually and stylistically empowered by their own fiction writing practice in English, my students become perceptive enough to see fiction and truth 'as the mythological hydra that can speak with many tongues, each in a different head' (Kupchik, 2014: 291), so as to be able 'to convert ambiguity into shared meaning' (Meltzer & Meltzer, 2008: 158). To achieve the desired effect of fictional ambiguity, they try various technical devices, such as the removal of linear plot-development and of omniscient narration, the shifts of time and of narrative viewpoint, and the dramatic uses of pun, antithesis, paradox, verbal irony, and structural irony, each of which by itself implies more than one meaning.

Intertextuality

One of the open-minded advancements that my Chinese students have made in our fiction writing workshops in English is their gradual, steady transformation of the generally acknowledged 'anxiety of influence' into a creative kind of adaptability of influence by means of intertextuality – a term coined by Julia Kristeva to refer to 'the transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another' (1984: 60). In Frank J. D'Angelo's opinion, 'intertextuality describes the relationships that exist between and among texts' (2010: 33). My responsibilities as facilitator of fiction writing workshops in English include delivering motivational mini-lectures, introducing theoretical concepts, analysing recurrent themes, recommending practical writing skills, and the last but not the least, organising in-class guided readings/discussions of classic short stories as 'model' works (written in English or translated into English) selected from non-Chinese as well as Chinese literary traditions, so that my students can 'better understand the desired goals of each of their own writing tasks, when having perused and explored the linguistic features and creative objectives of the multiple model works of the same genre' (Wang, 2019: 93). Ideally, they learn to transform themselves from 'textual interpreters' into 'textual producers' (Mayers, 2009: 227), and even into intertextual reproducers.

Christian Kupchik is right when he supports Jorge Luis Borges' idea that 'fiction feeds on fiction' (2014: 292). Ming Dong Gu also declares pertinently, 'just as reading is inseparable from writing, so the critical perspective should not be divorced from the creative perspective' (2014: 219). I therefore advise my students to base their fiction writings on their fiction readings on purpose to conscientiously establish intertextual links between those 'model' works and their own works, which might be seemingly imitative in a way, but essentially creative by themselves, for they might allude to, correspond to, agree to, clash against, or simply go beyond those 'model' works treated not as texts of dogmatic authoritativeness, but as inter-texts of adaptability, as sources of inspiration, or as starting-points of new mental journeys.

Two of my students' short stories written in English can be briefly mentioned here to serve as examples of intertextuality. (1) Student G models her piece of fantasy fiction 'The magic carpet over my hometown' after the well known story of a flying carpet from *The Arabian Nights*, and describes the huge carpet customised in China as being capable both of flying high in the sky and of clearing away her hometown's smog. (2) Student H creates a narrative sequel to George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, and invents Eliza's emotionally charged talk with Professor Higgins a week before her own wedding.

All in all, my students are motivated to view intertextuality as the philosophy explaining the technique of rewriting and 'expanding it into a

world view' (Bertens & Fokkema, 1997: 178), enter a new exciting realm of adaptation, modification, and recreation, and further learn about 'creative intersubjectivity' from intertextuality, regarding 'the value of empathy' 'as a component of communicative openness with the Other and the revelation of alterity' (Gunzenhauser, 2013: 71). In this way, they are enabled to re-contextualise and renew certain components of diverse literary traditions and conventions, and represent the universal factors of human nature through imaginatively constructed intertextual connections, and through empathetic, intersubjective correspondences as well.

Tellability

My Chinese students' fiction writing practice in English clearly indicates that tellability, or reportability, could transcend Meir Sternberg's stylistic emphasis on the 'universals of narrative interest (suspense, curiosity, surprise)' (Herman & Vervaeck, 2009: 111), and might bring the students' imaginative, inventive, and productive potentials into full play, in their attempt to find individualistic voices to tell interesting stories in English.

When they are inspired to give their own fictional utterances in English as EFL learners, they do not have to suffer from the so-called 'anxiety of aphasia' any longer. Moreover, they understand that they are in fact engaged in a meaning-seeking and meaning-sharing business of tellability, which 'addresses audience expectations, newsworthiness, uniqueness, relevance, importance, and humor but also – and perhaps just as centrally – appropriateness, contextualization, negotiation, mediation, and entitlement' (Goldstein & Shuman, 2012: 119), and they take delight in the textually and intertextually proved tellability of their deepest thoughts and emotions in the actual process of fiction writing in English.

Practically speaking, the inseparable elements of fiction, such as narration, characterisation, and tone, all contribute to tellability. Learning by doing, my students are given various short fiction writing assignments in English, that is to say, writing opportunities to make genuine experiments in choosing proper narrative viewpoints, creating lifelike characters, and establishing their unique attitudinal tones of tellability. For instance, by taking advantage of those creative opportunities, (1) a student may learn to critically reread the short story that he/she has written, analyse the role of the first-person point of view as used in it, and then rewrite

the whole story, changing the point of view, and taking into consideration all the other things that he/she needs to change correspondingly to fit the new narrator and voice; (2) a student may learn to create a round character in a short story, individualise the character to make the inner conflicts understandable, and meanwhile create a flat character as a foil, who sets off the round character by contrast; (3) a student may learn to write a short story, in which he/she gives enough details to enable the reader to infer his/her attitude toward the subject, and in which he/she may amuse, anger, or shock the reader through his/her tone.

Exemplified below is Student I's personal reflection, an articulation of tellability – in her fiction writing practice itself, she has found her own storytelling voices, metaphorically, she has found her own dance tempos, and her own dance floors:

> I am a happy writer of short fiction, though I have been sometimes tormented by it. The aftertastes of the stories I have told in English generate many more joys than I have ever expected. Tellability is so mesmerizing and rewarding. I have lived and relived many lives, and tasted life to the utmost while telling meaningful and beautiful stories in English. Fiction writing has a life of its own. My interaction with it is like dancing. Sometimes it's Waltz, sometimes Cha-cha, and sometimes Jazz. But one thing is for sure. You will never get bored.

What is more, in her short story 'A lucky egret', Student J has stepped out of the circle of self, and has found appropriate story-telling voices for the endangered bird as well as for herself, mainly by using figurative depictions of personification, thus empathetically rendering the story of a non-human life tellable from multiple perspectives, and vividly generating a fictional narrative of biological protection, and of the affinity between human and nonhuman existence.

Hybridity

Fiction writing workshops in English as conducted in China inherently demonstrate the distinctive characteristics of hybridity, conceived of as 'code for creativity and for translation' (Hutnyk, 2005: 81), as a 'process of translating and transvaluing cultural differences' (Bhabha, 1994: 252), and as an evocation of 'all manner of creative engagements in cultural exchange' (Hutnyk, 2005: 83). Compatible with intercultural communication in the contemporary world, the aforementioned writing workshops are designed to engage Chinese students 'who intentionally put their creative energy

to work in order to express their existential experience of hybridity' (Kraidy, 2005: 12). During the fiction writing workshops in English at BISU, strategically following hybridity 'as the cultural logic of globalization' (Kraidy, 2005: 161), my students and I lay special emphasis on 'intentional hybridity' as 'a communicative phenomenon', and as 'the result of an artistic intention and stylistic organization' (Kraidy, 2005: 152) – in the hope that the student-writers can create transculturally communicative fictional works containing hybrid forms, styles, and implications, and meanwhile recreate their hybrid cultural and intercultural identities.

One of the most intriguing features of my Chinese students' short fiction written in English is their deliberate use of China English as a hybrid means of self-expression, justifying the 'inevitability' of China English, and throwing light on the 'Chinese cultural identity hidden behind it' (He & Liu, 2008: 86). China English has been defined and redefined in many ways. Considering it to be constantly in progress, Zhichang Xu is theoretically accurate to define China English as 'a developing variety of English, which is subject to ongoing codification and normalization processes [. . .] It is characterized by the transfer of Chinese linguistic and cultural norms at varying levels of language, and it is used primarily by Chinese for intra- and international communication' (2008: 4). Here Xu's emphasis on the changing features and communicative functions of China English is particularly relevant to my Chinese students' short fiction writing practice and their creative output in English.

The hybrid nature of China English enables (or forces) my Chinese students as EFL learners to use English as a 'contact language' to create 'contact literature' (Kachru, 1992: 317) – in other words, to make multiple comparative and/or contrastive points of contact between fiction and truth, between the self and the other, between what is native (or familiar) and what is foreign (or unfamiliar), between what is explicable by using China English and what is inexplicable otherwise, finally, between what constitutes bilingual creativity and what signifies transcultural awareness, so as to rationalise what is linguistically, culturally, and transculturally adaptable, and to throw new light on what is central to effective fictional representations of the depths of human life.

The following paragraphs display several excerpts from the short fiction written in English by my Chinese students, K, and L, and embody the hybrid quality of China English and its expressiveness in terms of lexicon, syntax, and discourse.

(1) Eleven long months later, as *a Beijing drifter*, I finally got a job in the immense metropolis. I seldom went back home from then on. The only family reunion would be around the Spring Festival.
(Male undergraduate student, 2nd year, English major)

A term widely used during recent decades, 'a Beijing drifter' refers to a person who is not a Beijing local, but tries hard to make a living in Beijing – with Beijing metaphorically compared to a vast sea, and a non-native (especially a young person) to a drifter on the sea. In student K's story, that specific term of China English has certain sociological and psychological implications, which are much more profound than the mere notion of making a living in Beijing. On the one hand, as a Beijing drifter, the first-person narrator in the story needs to work diligently to earn money and credit in the big city; on the other, more importantly, he needs to maintain his inner balance to gradually establish a sense of identification with the city, a sense of rootedness in the city, and a sense of certainty about his own fate.

(2) Big Li's wife gave birth to five babies during one single night. On the very day when the quins got one month old in December, there was a traditional full-month celebration. The Little Flower Village, which was usually quiet, became noisy, as the neighbours crowded into Big Li's house. The house was hot and stuffy. An old iron stove lay in the middle. It was red with the burning coal. Piled up on the paintless round table were the fellow villagers' celebratory gifts – bracelets, baby diapers, eggs, noodles, flaky pastries, crispy cookies, bottles of sugar, and even a small colour camera. All those things did *give Big Li a great deal of face*. He was sitting on the edge of the big *kang*, his back very straight. His wife was sitting cross-legged behind him. She looked overwhelmed with pride and joy, and she wore the red cotton-padded clothes handmade by her mother. Close to her knees were the five babies who lay side by side, and cried one after another.
(Female postgraduate student, 1st year, English major)

Student L's story is set in one of those early years of China's Reform and Opening-up in the 1980s, and offers glimpses into emerging prospects of fertility and prosperity. The 'kang' in the story (i.e. a word of China English that means an old-fashioned

heatable brick bed, often seen in some rural areas of northern China) not only connotes that the story takes place in the north of China, but also juxtaposes itself with such celebratory gifts as a colour camera to subtly indicate the coexistence of bits of tradition and bits of modernity at the small village in an age of great social change. As the story shows through the sound and colour images, and through the characters' interactions, the full-month celebration for the five one-month-old babies' healthy growth and good luck is held in a typically festive atmosphere – in the close-knit rural community – with the relatives, friends, and neighbours following traditional rules to give plenty of gifts to the babies. The more gifts the parents (Big Li and his wife) receive on their babies' behalf, the more excited they become, as they are happily aware that they are given 'a great deal of face', which is in China English equivalent to 'being treated with respect and honour'.

Conclusion

In terms of Kachru's three concentric circles of English, China English in the Expanding Circle has the potentials to enrich, enliven, and revitalise World Englishes. It is in fact 'a developing variety of English' to be 'more widely used in China', and 'nativized in different aspects of the Chinese society' (Xu, Deterding & He, 2017: 12). After all, China English is not anti-English, nor is its development or expansion an out-of-control one from the Expanding Circle. The justifiable development of China English, in one word, is necessarily based on the dynamic balance between its root-seeking, centripetal expansion towards the Inner Circle (still respected as the source of 'standard English') and its simultaneous, centrifugal expansion towards the ever new realms of Chinese-style English expressions (constantly updated to best showcase linguistic, cultural, and intercultural diversity-in-unity).

The aforementioned F-A-I-T-H approach is rooted in the multicultural literary and linguistic traditions that deserve to be honoured today; it is meant to train Chinese university students to become transcendently imaginative, artistically innovative, intra-culturally and/or inter-culturally communicative through creative English education, to be more specific in this context, through short fiction writing in English – sometimes inevitably using China English.

As China English is being developed 'into a full-fledged member of the World Englishes family' (Xu, 2017: 260), the F-A-I-T-H approach, at its best, may macroscopically function as a collective creative endeavour to put English to actual use in China for the purposes of intracultural communication nationwide and intercultural communication worldwide; moreover, it may microscopically provide each of the Chinese university students with dialectical insights, cultural recognitions, and intercultural inspirations. Viewed in this light, my Chinese students' creative outcomes – short fiction in English – do prove that they can learn to dramatically increase their creative thinking and writing effectiveness in a well structured fiction writing workshop in English so as to resort to the medium of China English to make their own narratives globally understandable within the entire family of World Englishes, and that their artistic imagination, intuitive wisdom, and heightened writing capability can most probably empower them to recreate the factual into the fictional, or to transform 'the untrue' into the plausible, and even into the truthful.

Acknowledgements

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