CREATIVE WRITING AND ICONICITY IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract: Creative writing workshops in high-school English-as-a-foreign-language education have had little attention from researchers so far. Addressing this gap, this paper investigates the creative production of Brazilian high-school students after a workshop unit on iconicity. Their iconic poems are analysed visually, thematically and stylistically. Despite variation in students' self-identified language proficiency, the results show that the poems presented visual and thematic diversity. The stylistic analysis evidenced the richness of students' creations notwithstanding their lack of English proficiency. Although some surface language infelicities are identified, these do not limit their expression. Overall, the findings reveal that iconicity was not only an appropriate topic for these students, but it also proved to be a genuine way by means of which they could freely express their individuality, breaking away with conventions, reflecting on a variety of matters, and registering their observation of the world and of themselves.

Keywords: creative writing, iconicity, English as a foreign language, stylistics, high school, poetry

1) Introduction

Where creativity comes from and how it develops still puzzles scientific research (Boden 1996) despite efforts from various fields, including neuroscience (Damasio 2001). Focusing on both the individual mind and the sociocultural environment, Csíkszenmihályi (2007) does not pin down its origin but proposes that creativity develops by means of five incremental stages: preparation, incubation, insight, evaluation and elaboration. In the first one, the

individual becomes immersed in issues that may have aroused curiosity. This stage involves getting acquainted with rules and patterns and modes of behaviour, among other factors. In the incubation stage, the mind just wanders, with no deliberate intention. It is a moment in which 'ideas churn around below the threshold of consciousness. It is during this time that unusual connections are likely to be made' (Csíkszenmihályi 2007, 40). Inspiration then occurs. This is known as the 'aha' moment or the insight stage when ideas come together like pieces of a puzzle. Once this happens, one must decide whether this integrated whole is worth pursuing. The evaluation phase is followed by elaboration, which Csíkszenmihályi (2007) considers the hardest and most time-consuming as this is when the newly developed connections are spelled out. In this stage, the initial insight materializes and is shared.

In pedagogical settings, working with creativity is most welcome, especially if seen as 'the tendency to generate or recognize ideas, alternatives, or possibilities that may be useful in solving problems, communicating with others, and entertaining ourselves and others' (Franken 1994, 396). This description helps teachers see creativity as a process that can be learned and developed step by step.

In a paper on the threshold concepts in creative writing, Adsit (2017, 1) argues that students gain 'a sensitivity and critical perspective on the world of letters that they did not have before.' Among the concepts she proposes, we highlight the following as the most relevant ones to our study:

(1) attention, or learning how to look at the world critically and generating new and original links;

(2) creativity, or the flexibility to adjust to the demands of a task and learn how to improvise;

(3) authorship, or engaging with the writing in such a way that students see themselves as writers;

(4) language, when students become aware of the possibilities of the material they work with and that this material is embedded in identity, culture, history and power;

(5) genre, when students learn how certain conventions serve certain genres and situations;

(6) craft, when students analyse the choices they make and anticipate the effects these choices obtain;

(7) evaluation, when students learn that the value of their work is not in the work itself but on how it may become relevant to the community;

(8) representation, or becoming aware that creative writing, irrespective of the writer's level and proficiency in language, both reflects and stimulates culture;

(9) resistance, when students question, subvert conventions and refuse to take for granted certain assumptions.

In this study, we will analyse the creative outcomes of a workshop unit which followed the concepts listed above.

2) Creativity in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom

Language users are always innovating for effect – in daily news, advertising, text messages, tweets, and online chats, to cite a few examples (e.g. Carter 2004). They should therefore not only learn about language regularities – so that some common ground is established – but they should also be able to subvert these regularities for the purpose of creative expression. Linguistic proficiency – whether in a first, second or foreign language – implies being ready to cope with aspects such as novelty, double meanings and innuendos, which cannot be fully predicted. Because breaking rules and innovating are a constant in language use (Carter 2004; Pope 1995), they should have a place in the EFL classroom.

While it is undeniable that being creative is a positive skill for foreign language learners – so much so that interest in creativity in education has expanded worldwide (Disney 2014; Hall 2015) – it can also be seen as rather challenging. For instance, Mansoor (2010, 202) discusses problems in teaching a creative writing course at the International Islamic University (Islamabad) such as students' limited vocabulary knowledge and first-language interference. She argues that participants considered rote-learning a comfort zone that they resisted to leave and remarks that they 'replicate ideas without their having to navigate unchartered intellectual territory' (202).

Creative writing may not allow clear-cut and predictable results as in pre-established models of language teaching/learning. Teachers need to develop a degree of tolerance to unpredictability and be open to work with disruptions, with feelings and other aspects of real life that may not be found in textbooks. As Hall (2015, 17) adds, 'playing with language is a natural and valuable activity for new users, and can range from an everyday pun or a deliberate mispronunciation or calque in the classroom, to the study of extended and pervasive playing with language to be found in the works of James Joyce or Shakespeare'.

When playing with language at all levels – be it phonetic, lexical, syntactical, or discoursal, students may practice how to subvert rules for the sake of creating new possibilities. According to Disney (2014, 42), in the L2 setting, 'language can be reframed as a pliant material that encourages (and rewards) playfulness, experimentation, and innovation'. The result can be empowering, as students are also transformed (Zyngier and Fialho 2010). Writing creatively in a second or foreign language promotes freedom of expression and allows learners – irrespective of their proficiency level – to bring out their innermost thoughts without being restrained by language issues. Instead of pursuing 'correct' uses of language, original language production can become 'beautiful, aesthetically pleasing, innovative and designed to surprise' (Hanauer 2014, 14; see also Adsit 2017).

When authoring their texts, students may generate original links typical of literary texts. For instance, the everyday experience of someone walking into a shop to buy flowers can turn into a moment of awe in the hands of Virginia Woolf. A girl wading in the water can be described as a moment of ecstasy by the onlooker, as Joyce did in *The Portrait of an Artist*. In the case of our students, for instance, drawing a clock may lead them to think of the impermanence of time (cf. Section 5.2).

In addition, exercising freedom to express their minds and feelings may help students become less diffident when required to comment on other writers' texts. Austen (2005) notes that university students tend to see literary texts as cryptic or to be revered rather than analysed, attitudes that lead to passive learning and to a state of paralysis. Creative writing activities may instead be quite effective in promoting independent thinkers who produce their own interpretations. Austen (2005, 139) argues that these activities may result in: '(1) dispelling the awe of literature and creating active learners; (2) developing critical readers; (3) furthering student understanding of literary criticism; (4) inspiring deeper commitment to excellence; and (5) motivating class bonding and dismantling the classroom hierarchy'.

Far from an unstructured and random exercise, creative writing should be seen as a scaffolding process requiring planning and systematization. In the EFL classroom, basic vocabulary and knowledge of language regularities are needed so that students know where, how and why they are innovating. In this paper, we will demonstrate how EFL learners can play with iconicity in English at the same time that they express themselves in 'an authentic and meaningful writing experience' (Hanauer 2014, 22).

3) Iconicity

Depending on the topic, creative writing lessons can be planned for a wide range of students, including those in the very early stages of learning. To cater for the needs of mixed-ability

classes, we decided to start our creative writing workshop series with a unit on iconicity. This is a miming form like photographs that reflect an object in the real world (Nanny and Fischer 2006). In the context of written language, the display of words on the page suggests a visual representation of the concepts these words intend to represent. This means that there is a strong resemblance between what the word signifies and how it is pictured on the page. Ellestrom (2016, 440) adds that:

> Iconicity is a semiotic notion that comprises creation of meaning based on resemblance, whether the signifying and signified entities are visual, auditory, or cognitive; iconicity includes phenomena such as verbal sound representing natural sound (onomatopoeia), moving visual images representing visual occurrences (as in film), static visual images representing abstract relations (for instance, graphs), and word order representing an order of events in what is signified by the words (syntactic iconicity, for instance "she (1) started to read but (2) soon fell asleep").

An example of iconic production is McGough's (1991, 58) 'Autumn Poem' to which workshop students were introduced (see Zyngier and Viana 2016). In this poem, the words are arranged in the form of an angle bracket, indicating the path followed by leaves falling from trees in the autumn or the movement of a flock of birds.

<div style="text-align:center">

Autumn Poem

</div>

litter
       is
            turning
                brown
                   and
                       the
                           road
                              above
                         is
                       filled
                   with
                hitch

                        hikers
              heading
        south

Like in adverts, iconicity in literature may be enticing and easily grasped. In the context where our study was conducted, it was selected to as the opening topic for the creative writing workshop as it may be less linguistically demanding for students who are not proficient in English. They may use their previous knowledge in L1 and the notions they learn in class to build new worlds when playing with EFL. In this sense, iconicity offered a challenge that students could meet.

4) Context

This study was conducted in a government-sponsored high school in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where the students learn their mother tongue – Portuguese – and can choose which foreign language to study – English or French. One of the specific challenges of EFL education in this high school is its mixed-ability student cohort. In an attempt to overcome problems typical in this context, students are divided into two main groups: (1) those who know little English and (2) those who have some knowledge of this language. The first group takes regular classes focusing on reading as a skill and grammar as a system while the second one can choose a thematic workshop. At the time the study was undertaken, students could opt for a video or a creative writing workshop.

The creative writing workshop differed from traditional EFL instruction by being a student-centred pedagogical experience which integrated language and literature with a focus on creative writing and stylistics. In other words, not only were the participants encouraged to craft their own outputs, but they were also stimulated to consider to what purpose they would use certain stylistic resources such as rhymes and repetitions, narrative categories and metaphors.

Each workshop unit ended with the students producing a text of their own at home on which they received formative feedback. The outputs were also used as one of the three elements which made up students' final averages (the other two being (i) attendance, participation and questionnaire completion, and (ii) production of reflective accounts). Marks were awarded for task completion only and not for the quality of the work.

Three creative writing workshops were offered concomitantly to 40 EFL students at this Brazilian school: 12 in the first year, 15 in the second year and 13 in the third year. Despite the fact that only those who knew English were allowed to join the workshop, their language proficiency differed dramatically: they self-evaluated themselves from elementary to fluent (see Zyngier and Viana 2016).

Out of the 40 participants, 32 handed in an iconic poem at the end of the first unit. All but one poem were hand-drawn in the workshop booklet. With due permission from the students, the poems were scrutinized by the researchers, as discussed in the following section.

5) Students' creative writing

Our analysis considered the visual, thematic and stylistic aspects of the students' productions. The same methodological procedure was followed in each case: both researchers examined all the poems individually and then compared the results. The few cases in which the categorizations diverged were discussed thoroughly until an agreement was reached.

5.1) Visual and thematic analyses

The visual analysis consisted of examining how the sentences were spatially displayed on the page and what shape was created (see Table 1) – without reading them for content. For example, one poem consists of the sentence 'Walking, walking, walking, walking, walking

around the world!' (2CP)[1] written in a circle. Had we taken into account the linguistic content, we could have understood the sphere as a representation of the world. However, as nothing visually supports that interpretation, its shape was categorized as a circle.

Table 1 presents a breakdown of the shapes in the data, which have been clustered into content categories in order to highlight commonalities.

Table 1: Visual results

Category	Total	Shape	Quantity per shape
Nature	10	Heart	3
		Tree	2
		Carrot; Flower; lightning + island; water drop; wing	1
Movement	6	Path	3
		Circle	2
		Wave	1
Object	6	Ball; Car; Clock; Dice; Paint; Wheel	1
Sky	4	Star	2
		Cloud; Moon	1
Semiotic sign	3	Question mark	2
		Music notes	1
No shape	3	N/A	3

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[1] For the sake of anonymity, our participants are referred to by a three-character code consisting of one digit and two letters. The digit indicates the high-school year (i.e. 1st, 2nd or 3rd), and the letters are a unique identifier.

Table 1 shows the variety of shapes employed in the iconic poems, which evidence that the participants felt totally free to create. It is interesting to note that nearly one third of the poems displayed the shape of natural elements such as trees and flowers (see also Figure 1). Movements (see Figure 5) and objects were also frequently found. Students seemed to rely on their world knowledge when choosing how to organize their words on the paper. Three of the poems were assigned to the category 'no shape' because, in these cases, they did not display one – most likely intentionally. For instance, in a poem dedicated to the topic of space and time, the student decided to place the sentences rather chaotically all over the page. As he writes in one of the free verses, '[t]he moviment shape the space and the time'[2] (3NA).

Altogether, the 32 poems presented 22 different shapes (including the lack of an identifiable form). This variety evidences how empowered they felt to exercise their creativity. Shape similarity only happens up to a maximum of three times in the data (cf. 'heart', 'path', and 'no shape' in Table 1).

Our subsequent analysis identified the topic that the students had opted for. For example, the poem 'The sea is wonderful and perfect. It is always moving because of the waves. One second it is on TOP and when you close your eyes, it's DOWN LOW. And when we think it is gonna be still it is already starting again.' (3MI) was categorized as 'natural world' under the topic 'sea tide'. Table 2 indicates the categories that emerged from the thematic analysis, their respective quantification, the specific topics found in the data, and their individual frequencies.

Table 2: Thematic results

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2 Students' creative productions were not edited.

Category	Total	Topic	Quantity per topic
Human experiences	12	Love	3
		Life	2
		Confusion; Eternity; Knowledge; Lost object; Perspective; Self; Time	1
Natural world	11	Birds; Carrot; Clouds; Flower; Heart; Island; Moon; Sea tide; Space and time; Trees; Water	1
Human creation	7	Ball; Baseball; Cars; Clock; Dices; Music; Wheel	1
Activities	2	Flying; Walking	1

Table 2 shows that nearly all poems (29 out of 32) had a specific and unique topic. Only two themes were repeated: love (in three poems) and life (in two poems), proving that the participants did not feel straightjacketed. Despite this thematic heterogeneity, Table 2 reveals that the topics converge around four main categories: 'human experiences', 'natural world', 'human creation' and 'activities'.

When Tables 1 and 2 are compared, we can notice that (i) the visual categories are more heterogeneous than the thematic ones (6 vs. 4) and (ii) there is more diversity in terms of topics than of shapes. The former indicates that the shapes chosen by the students do not share as many commonalities as the topics: they range from representations of nature to semiotic signs. On the other hand, the thematic results evidence variety in topic selection. Except for five poems, the productions show very little topic overlap (cf. Table 2). Even in

those poems where the motif is the same, we notice that their foci and wordings are distinct. For example, while Student 1SJ questions the meaning of life in English ('What's the real reason of the life? Why we have to live years and years for later to die? Why? Why?'), Student 2BH tries to explain it ('Sometimes, life may seems like a jump into death, but, in truth, it is a flight to the freedom').

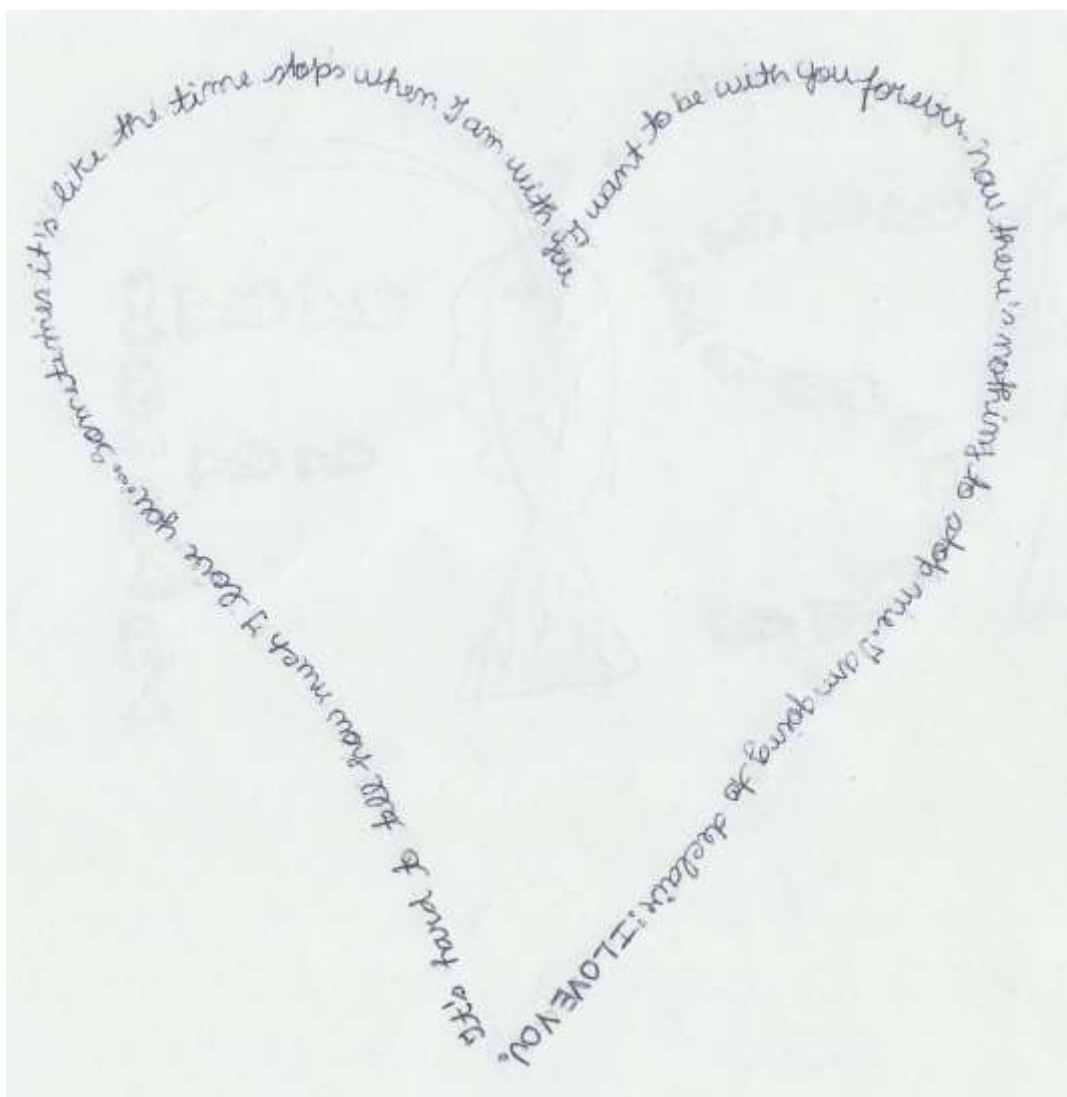In some poems, shape and topic coincide, as is the case in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Heart-shaped poem on love (3SM)

Here, the poem deals with the human experience of love. The student displays five sentences spatially as a heart. Despite self-evaluating herself as advanced in terms of EFL proficiency, some mistakes are apparent (e.g. the incorrect spelling of 'declare' as 'declair'). What is most important, however, is that these mistakes did not prevent her from writing a poem in a foreign language.

5.2. Stylistics analysis

The next step involved a stylistic analysis of the poems to check how the students used linguistic patterns for effect.

In 'Broken Clock', Student 3FT illustrates the impermanence of time. He draws a clock by means of continuous sentences which direct the reader's eyes (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Clock-shaped poem on time (3FT)

An existential question is placed by means of a clock where time has stopped. The logic is constructed as follows: the structure 'as + noun + verb + by' is repeated, creating a constant beat. Out of 30 words, only two are dissyllabic: 'people' and 'broken'. The first related to passers-by, and the second one to a clock. In both cases, the long words are part of a comparison: 'like this broken stopped clock' and 'like people in a street'. The interrogative pronoun 'why' is also repeated, creating an effect of anxiety. Stylistically, the poem works well as the chosen language structures help obtain the effect intended.

Another example of how form and function work is shown in Figure 3. Student 1TG, who self-evaluates her knowledge of English as elementary, created her poem as three dice.
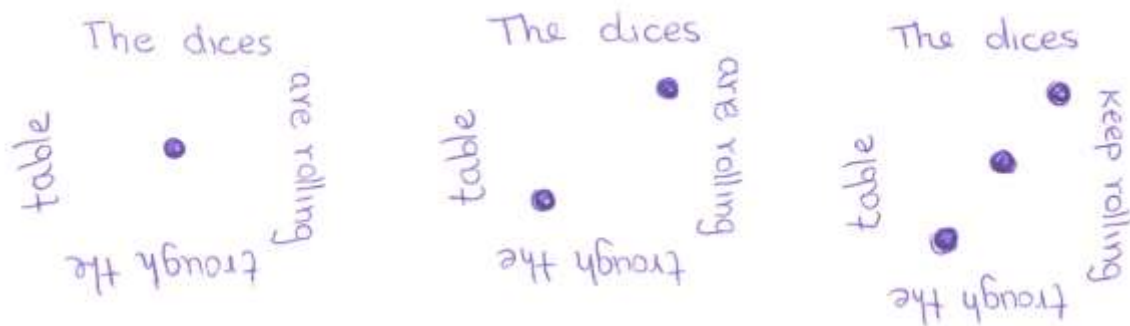
Figure 3: Dice-shaped poem on dice (1TG)

Repetition – both visually and linguistically – is the essence of this poem. The three verses spatially represented in the same way provide the boundaries of the dice. The only visual difference is the number of dots, which increases from one to three as the poem is read from left to right. This gives the reader the impression that the dice are moving on the page as

explicitly mentioned in the poem: 'the dices are rolling'.

In relation to language use, the same syntactic structure is repeated in the poem – namely, subject, verb and adverbial. Both the subject ('the dices') and the adverbial ('through the table') are realized in the same way: the former contains a noun phrase (article and noun), and the latter consists of a prepositional phrase (preposition, article and noun). The only change lies in the verb phrase where 'keep' replaces 'be' to indicate continuity.

If the dice are understood as signals of uncertainty and unpredictability, this creation can be seen as a reference to a movement that cannot be controlled by the writer. In other words, irrespective of her will, the poet has no power over the dice. Unstoppable fluidity is foregrounded: human beings cannot control future events. Thus, the student contributes with a reflection over the human condition.

The link between shape and topic as shown in Figures 1, 2 and 3 is not as transparent in all poems, though. Sometimes students appropriate themselves of one of the elements mentioned in their poems to decide the way in which they will display the words. For example, Student 1SA expresses her wish to reach eternity (see Figure 4). There is no direct link between eternity and a star as is the case between love and a heart (cf. Figure 1). The visual and thematic links are made clear as one reads the poem, though.
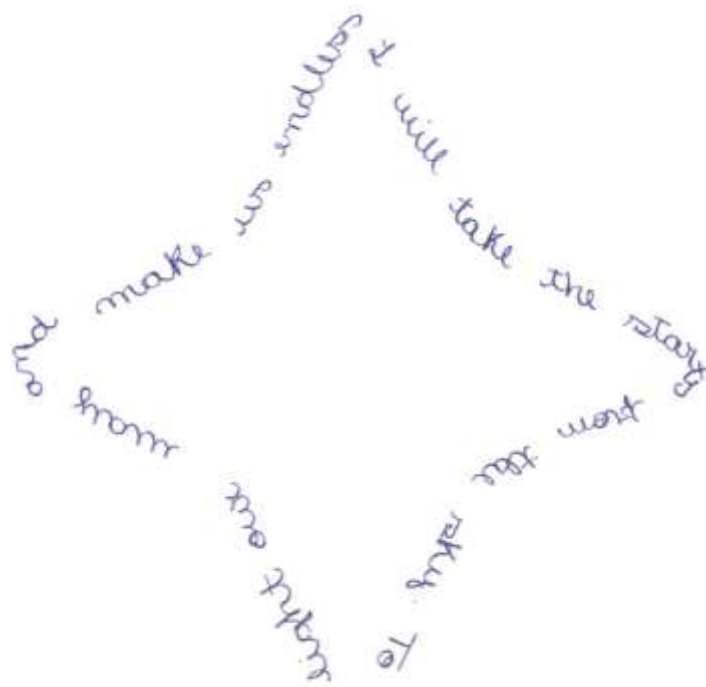
Figure 4: Star-shaped poem on eternity (1SA)

Here, the lyric 'I' indicates her intention to use the stars to brighten her and her lover's path so that they become eternal as a couple.

Moving clockwise from the top right point, the star is drawn on the page by means of a complete sentence ('I will take the starts from the sky.') and a sentence fragment indicating purpose ('To light out way and make us endless.'). The visual display could be potentially improved if these two parts had been written on different sides of the paper (i.e. the sentence fragment could have started on the bottom left-hand side of the star. This is especially the case because the writer seems to have allowed words to flow in the horizontal points of the star (i.e. 'starts' and 'and'), but the same does not hold true in relation to the vertical points (i.e. 'to / light' and 'endless / I'). These graphological vertical breaks could have neatly coincided with syntactic structures.

In terms of the language used, despite the student's perceived intermediate knowledge of English, the poem is carefully crafted with a sequence of monosyllabic words. The only exception is 'endless', which is placed at the end of the poem and becomes foregrounded. The consonance of the voiceless sound /s/ in words like 'starts', 'sky' and 'us' adds to the meaning of the poem by echoing with the sound of endlessness. As in Figure 1, we can also notice a morphological mistake here ('starts' for 'stars'). This mistake, however, does not reduce the effect of the poem.

In a few cases, the link between shape and form is not evident, as in the case of Figure 5.
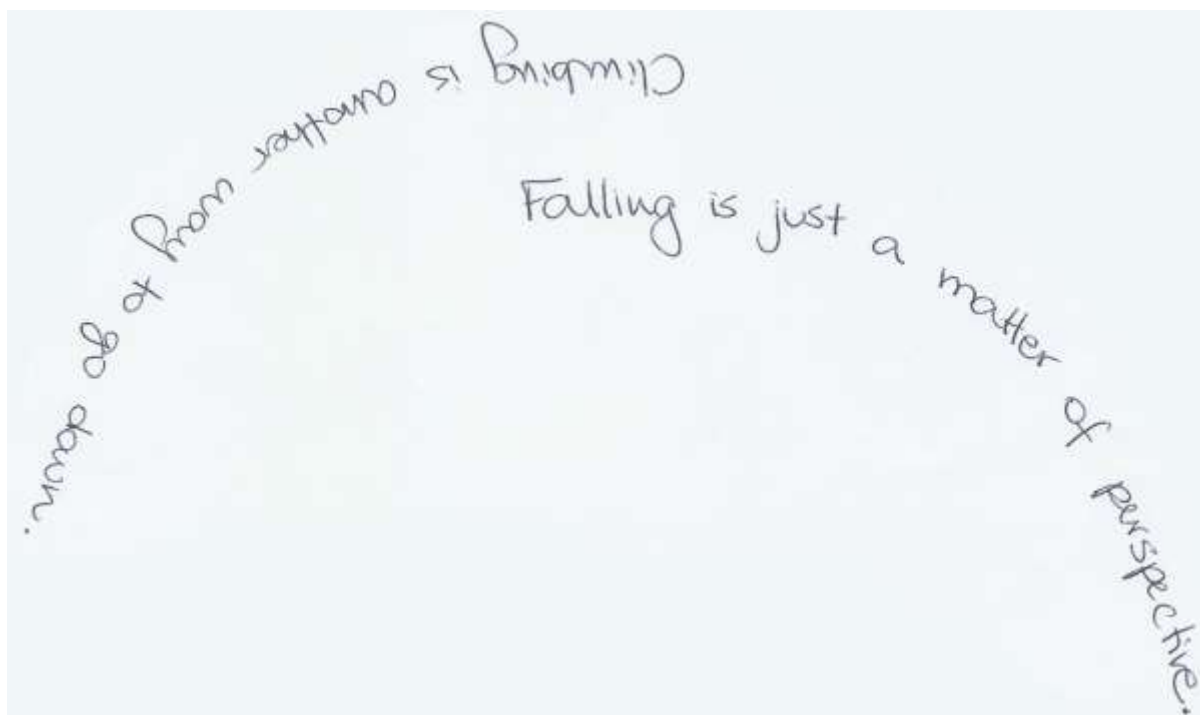
Figure 5: Path-shaped poem on perspectives (3AR)

Student 3AR, who evaluates her use of English as that of a beginner, creates a poem from two opposing sentences: one rising and the other falling, displayed as a path and creating an

impression of movement. If one reads the second sentence (notice the use of 'another') as displayed in Figure 5, it seems that both sentences present a downward movement. However, if the paper is turned upside down, both sentences move upwards as shown in Figure 6.
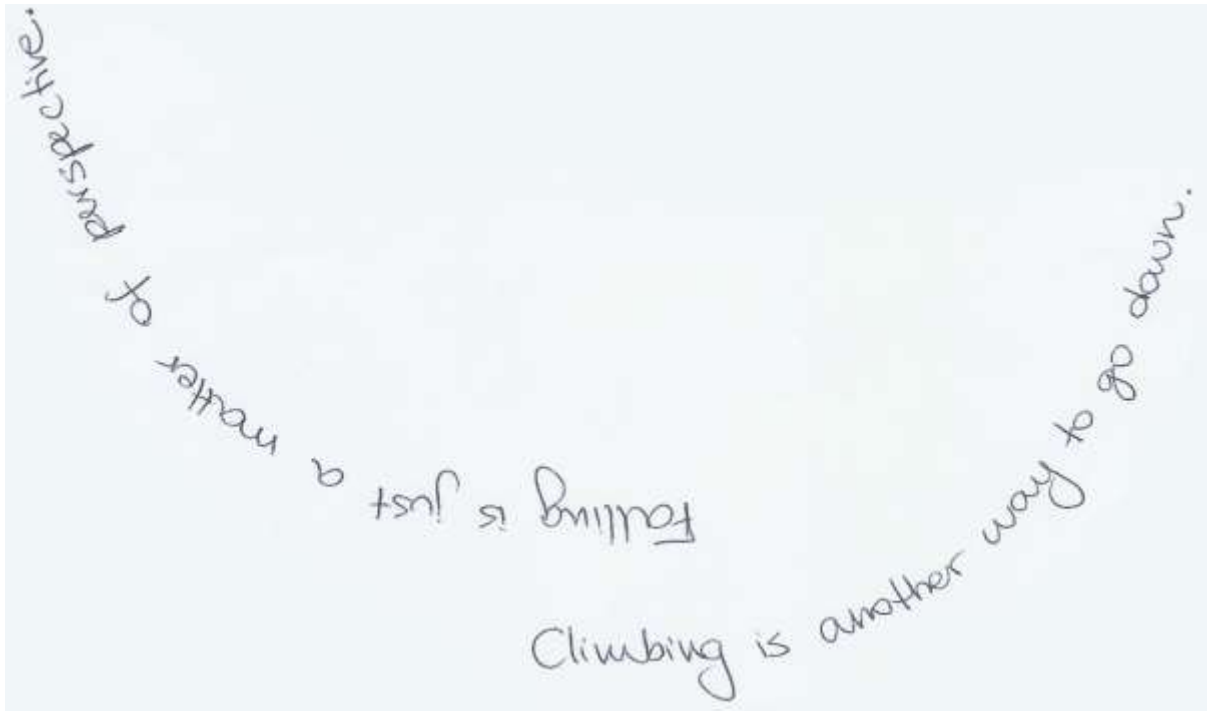

Figure 6: Path-shaped poem on perspectives upside down (3AR)

This example illustrates the student's creativity with only two sentences. Each of these two sentences can also be explored from a different angle. One can read the first sentence as shown in Figure 5, and then turn the paper upside down to read the second sentence. Perspective is illustrated in an ingenious two-dimensional way, and an unanticipated link is established between shape and form. The student manages to turn the ordinary into an extraordinary experience.

Creativity was not only restricted to visual expression: the author also managed to accomplish a great deal verbally. The sentences are parallel: both contain a one-word subject consisting of a verb in the present participle which functions as a noun, and a predicate which

starts with the verb to be. The actions of 'climbing' and 'falling' are thematised and followed by the present tense form 'is', revealing a time-proof description of these actions. The second sentence contains a paradox (i.e. 'climbing' vs. 'to go down'). The writer brings out the notion that things may be determined by the way we see them. In this sense, she questions objective reality and holds that we are free to shape our perspectives. Such a simple poem, written by a high-school EFL learner, may be seen as highly philosophical, that is, a poem where the student deconstructs natural laws which may give us stability and certainty.

Examples such as the ones described here show that, irrespective of their language proficiency, students did exercise their freedom to create, and evidence that the nine concepts we cited above (Adsit 2017, 1) can find their way into a workshop based on iconicity.

6) Conclusion

The decision to work with iconicity in an EFL high-school setting proved quite enriching. Crafting iconic poems is not too demanding linguistically (Wales 1989), being thus easily adaptable to students' diverse proficiency levels. Although they did not fully master English, the students were capable of expressing themselves in novel ways in this foreign language, playing with both form and meaning. In creating the poems, they expressed their innermost feelings, transforming their 'practice, sense of themselves and the world, and/or way of being' (Adsit 2017, 1).

Our analysis shows that shapes and topics varied. Only six shapes and two topics were repeated, and this was limited to a maximum of three poems. Most importantly, even when two or three poems presented the same shape or form, they were still unique: the language used and the perspective adopted did not coincide. The results also show how the

students were able to use linguistic choices skilfully and to create the effects they intended (Carter 2004; Pope 1995).

The workshop unit deviated from the traditional way of teaching and learning EFL by privileging a creative approach where the students had an active role. Our previous studies indicated that the participants viewed the experience as pedagogically valid (cf. Viana and Zyngier 2017; Zyngier and Viana 2016). Here, we provided evidence that they also learned how to work with iconicity and found room to express themselves. Their productions stand as evidence that these students, who were not fully proficient in English, appreciated engaging in creative writing and produced texts that were meaningful to them and to others.

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