

IMPLEMENTING THE EXTREMELY SHORT STORY COMPETITION (ESSC) IN EUROPE

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Abstract

This is a new type of language-learning activity which can be done online in class or at home by students. Within a 50-word limit, students are encouraged to tell a story which can be fact, fiction, poetry or prose in the target language (English). The competition is judged internationally, with the active encouragement of a teaching institution which then has to develop new links with business to provide prizes. In an appropriate ceremony for prize-winners, it can publicise itself through the students' use of English. Reference is also made to methodology available to stimulate the learning of English in the classroom.

Keywords: language-learning competition, corpora for research, host institution, further teaching material

Introduction

The objective in this article is to describe the ESSC and explain how it can be integrated into classroom activity to benefit both the individual learner and the institution where the learning takes place (the host institution).

Briefly, the 50-word competition originated from an idea of Aldiss (2001) who had run a series of such short stories in a British newspaper. However, notwithstanding its L1 background, the ESSC was adapted to foreign- or second-language learning in the Middle East with some success and it has also been implemented in Japan and Korea.

It is now proposed to launch the ESSC scheme in Europe where the help of Evaluation and Accreditation of Quality in Language Services (EAQUALS) has been particularly appreciated. Indeed, the scheme has been accepted for Project Partnership status by EAQUALS, though it is administered from Zayed University (ZU), Dubai, UAE. Given this background, the scheme is being launched in Greece and it is hoped that it will attract interest in Romania and Bulgaria.

The immediate objective of the scheme is to heighten awareness primarily for the learner to develop his/her expression in the target language (TL, which is English in this case). But there is also 'heighten awareness' in another sense: that of

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stimulating new interest for and by the host institution in terms of participation, prestige enhancement, and publicity. Such a seemingly modest objective of 'heightening awareness' deserves investigation in both senses.

The Product

The product of the processes later described is a short essay of 50 words on any topic (fact/fiction, poetry/prose) written by a learner of English; this essay is submitted in a competition online. The entrant can add a title which is not included in the 50 words, but the entry must be 50 words, not more, not less. The learner is encouraged to add a visual which relates thematically to the thoughts expressed in the 50 words. The entries are submitted in competition to be judged by an international panel of judges. Entries will be edited and no direct feedback is given to the writer. This last point is for practical purposes, as correcting grammatical points is deemed to be the role of the classroom teacher. However, the hard-pressed teacher need not fear that the ESSC takes over his/her teaching: it should not be viewed as another burden in getting through the curriculum. Instead the ESSC aims to complement classroom interaction, though as will be explained later, ESSC methodology can be integrated into classroom work.

The first thought is why 50 words? Surely essay writing tasks which are part of other exams require much greater length (like 250 words in IELTS, for example); a 50-word limit is not enough. In response, it is argued that a 50-word limit is still a meaningful chunk of text in the sense used by Allwright (1977). Furthermore, it is easier to process both as a classroom tool and administratively. Another advantage is that the 50-word limit widens scope for learner entry: it is not just intermediate or advanced learners, but pre-intermediate students who can participate. Indeed if it is decided that the methodology can be integrated into classroom learning, it could be extended to elementary learners too.

In a sense, while the scope for entry is considerable, so too is the scope for the term 'host institution': this could be a language learning institute in the private or public sector, the language department of a secondary school or a university. Basically it means any institution or part of an institution involved in language teaching (in this case English).

A limit of 50 words reduces learners' inhibitions about writing. Indeed, encouraging students to write within this limit offers positive encouragement to experiment with expression in the TL: compressing ideas from the mother tongue into such a TL limit, exploring vocabulary usage, etc., though it is not intended that the ESSC should become a curricular objective.

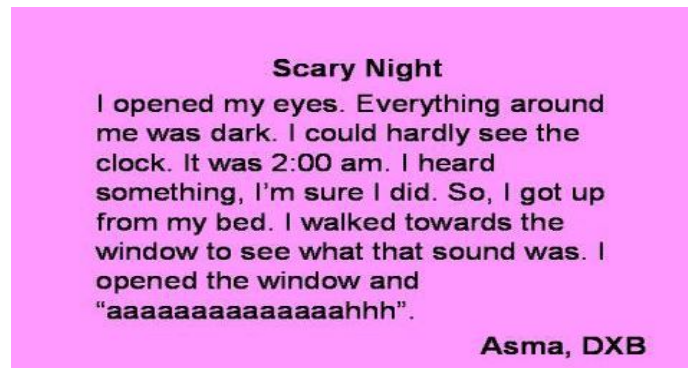
Also a compelling advantage is that essays can be written from home if desired. Alternatively, entry can be done as part of classroom activity. However, one key point is that the students must undertake that their work is done on their own

without any help from others. This undertaking is given through the website, as is agreeing that the work they submit may be edited or used for research purposes.

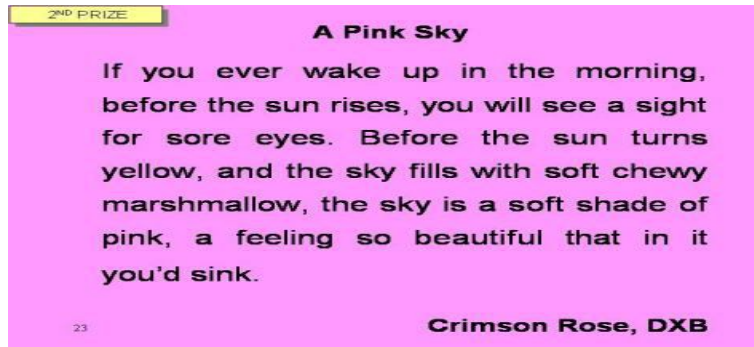
There are further encouragements to TL usage in that learners enter for the competition through its website (<http://50words.org>) so TL text entry skills are developed. But by far the most positive incentive is that entry is private and confidential: the learner can say what he/she wants. If an applicant chooses to use a nickname or *nom de plume*, this anonymity also offers a certain comfort factor in terms of confidentiality. In a conservative society like that of the United Arab Emirates, there is greater freedom of expression achieved than would publicly be acknowledged. Learners may like to use part of their e-addresses. Also there is no limit to the number of entries which a learner can submit. A final point to encourage entry is that it does not cost anything. As it is a competition, there should be prizes as incentives, but this is the responsibility of the host institution. In addition as a further motivation for the learner, there is the prestige of international recognition.

Two examples of student writing are given below, both taken from the anthologies referred to later.

Example 1



Example 2 is a prize-winner, notable because of the use of the *nom de plume* which encourages the freedom of expression. Within the 50-word limit, this example also shows how feeling and empathy can be expressed. Incidentally, this writer submitted more than one entry, which is not discouraged, with the objective of encouraging the development of expression in the TL.



The Processes

To summarise, for the student the process of entry is therefore direct. Each 50-word entry, plus optional visual, is submitted online and may be edited. Entries are judged by an international panel and then the prize winners revert to the host institution for an award-winning ceremony. An anthology of texts may be produced, depending on sponsorship. Three such publications have been produced so far: 1) “Emiratia: World English Voices of Emirati Women”, 2) “Pearls of Emirati Wisdom”, and 3) “Facets of Emirati Women”. The two examples of student writing given above are taken from one of them. Besides, with the inclusion of a visual, an exhibition can also be produced for publicity purposes.

For the host institution, the process is more complex. First of all, staff have to be nominated to administer the competition and their obvious first responsibility is to encourage students to participate. This is easier if ESSC methodology is included in the curriculum and some ideas are mentioned briefly below. However, in administrative terms, staff need to liaise with the local business community to obtain prizes and sponsorship. Experience has shown that prizes which are effective incentives are appropriate for the age-group of the learners. For example, teenagers like IT prizes, electronic gadgetry, etc. Publishers or cultural organisations are also a good source of sponsorship. It is highly desirable to compile an anthology of entries after editing, as mentioned above, but there is an obvious opportunity for linkage with local industry.

After adjudication by the international panel, the host institution arranges the award-winning ceremony. There is considerable scope for maximising publicity opportunities as such an event should be arranged with suitable promotion by local media coverage (press, radio, TV). The award-ceremony is quite simply a marketing opportunity for the host institution and sponsors.

Benefits

The result of this process is material which can be produced into anthologies for further teaching purposes, as well as material which can be used for exhibition purposes, either in the host institution, or additionally if possible in some public venue, like a shopping mall or arts/cultural centre. As an example of what an exhibition looks like, attention is drawn to the Facets Travelling exhibition which was on display at the recent QUEST Romania presentation given by Peter Hassall and Ken Collins. This showed a 2-element display of text plus visual. In Dubai, a local newspaper took up the entries and ran a series of 2-element extracts from the competition: this is an example of how entries can be used for publicity. But the scope for promoting the student writing (and of course the host institution) increases with a translation of the texts as well, thus offering scope for local media exposure. There is therefore potential for attracting interest through organising an exhibition of entries in the ESSC (via the host institution) as well as the award-winning ceremony with due acknowledgement of sponsors. The opportunity for using an exhibition extends to both the students (materials have been developed for this purpose) and the local community, consisting of the public at large and the actual business community.

There are longer-term benefits too. By running the competition regularly, it is hoped to build up corpora for research and further teaching materials. The 2-element display presents opportunity for self-publicity within the host institution. In addition, it might be felt that the development of a 3-element display provides scope for display and publicity to a wider audience within the local speech environment.

A final point worth mentioning is that with the ESSC in mind, a teacher could choose to integrate ESSG methodology into classroom activities. There are a number of techniques available for developing writing (see Hassall, 2011, for a fuller explanation). Examples are briefly described as follows:

- 1) The 50-word limit lends itself to developing sentence length from simple (e.g. 10 sentences of 5 words for elementary learners, etc) to compound to complex sentences (e.g. 5 sentences for more advanced learners)
- 2) Writing for assessment offers opportunities for concentrating on accuracy and concise writing.
- 3) Dictation activities can stem from ESSC texts as they are of ideal length for this kind of activity.
- 4) Other stimuli for writing within the 50-word limit are recommended like telling a joke in the TL, recounting one's earliest memory, telling a horror story, expressing a hope for the future, recounting a folk-tale, etc.

Editing ESSC stories as a peer-group activity can be very useful too, especially if concentrating on a particular grammatical point. There are also ranges of reading activities which, with some thought, lend themselves to useful classroom activity. To gather a corpus of entries from one particular L1 background should in itself provide a lot of useful material for classroom exploitation. In addition, there is teaching material available for viewing an exhibition and linking into classroom interaction. Abu-Wardeh (2006) has some very helpful ideas on classroom exploitation of 50-word texts.

Conclusion

To sum up product and processes, the ESSC scheme most importantly offers the student considerable scope for TL development, fun, and the opportunity to win meaningful prizes, depending on how efficient the host institution has been in sourcing them. There are advantages in submitting entries anonymously, online (privately) and the possibility of more than one entry. For the host institution, there is the opportunity to innovate and develop its profile through interacting with the local business community. An award-winning ceremony offers scope for increasing the teaching institution's prestige through coverage by local media and the possibility of international linkage. For the classroom teacher, the general view is that the ESSC should complement classroom teaching as it is not intended that it should become a curricular objective; at the same time there are a lot of opportunities for integrating 50-word activities into the classroom teaching.

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After teaching in Saudi Arabia, UK, and Singapore, **Ken Collins** acquired extensive experience of teaching ESoL. The last part of his working career was in Dubai where he eventually became Head of the Centre for English as a Second Language at the University of Dubai until 2007. His specialism has included ESP: English for Business Purposes and English for Academic Purposes. He was until recently Middle East consultant for EAQUALS (European Association for Quality Language Services). He is now Project Co-ordinator for the Extremely Short Story Competition in Europe and resident in SW France.