

The role of literary competitions in developing students' writing

O papel dos concursos literários no desenvolvimento da escrita dos alunos

José Luís de Castro

Instituto Politécnico de Bragança, Portugal
zeluis1997@hotmail.com

Cláudia Martins

Instituto Politécnico de Bragança, Portugal
claudiam@ipb.pt

Resumo

Este artigo centrar-se-á na discussão da função que a escrita criativa pode ter, e de facto tem, no desenvolvimento e potenciamento da escrita dos alunos, seja na sua língua materna, seja em línguas estrangeiras, especialmente dos alunos do ensino superior. Alcançaremos este objetivo abordando o papel que os prémios literários desempenham nos dias de hoje, assim como no passado, e, em particular, descrevendo o funcionamento do Concurso Literário da Escola Superior de Educação do Instituto Politécnico de Bragança (ESEB). Finalmente, conduzimos três entrevistas a alguns dos vencedores nestes últimos cinco anos e, com base nestas, iremos refletir sobre as suas motivações, os prós e contras da competição, assim como o impacto que a sua participação terá no futuro dos alunos. Terminamos com considerações finais e recomendações no sentido de melhorar estas iniciativas no futuro.

Palavras-chave: *escrita criativa; prémios literários; Concurso Literário da ESEB; alunos de ensino superior; ensino-aprendizagem de línguas.*

Abstract

This article will focus on discussing the function that creative writing can and does perform on the development and enhancement of students' writing be it in their mother tongue or in foreign languages, namely students in higher education. We will achieve this by drawing on the role that literary prizes and awards play nowadays, as they did in the past, and particularly delve into the experience gained with the Literary Competition of the School of Education of the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança (ESEB). Finally, we conducted three interviews with some of the winners of the last five years and, based on these, we will reflect upon their motivations, the pros and cons of the competition, as well as the impact this participation will have on students' future. We will finish with some final remarks and recommendations for the future.

Keywords: *creative writing; literary prizes; ESEB's Literary Competition; higher education students; language learning.*

INTRODUCTION

Writing is inherent to human nature ever since men and women have attempted to communicate among themselves and to future generations. Though it is undeniable that oral communication preceded written one, and thus writing is secondary to oral speech (e.g. Lyons, 1995, p. 38),



humankind has not started jotting down their thoughts with the writing systems known to us nowadays. The first step was to use artistic means, such as the ones we can visit and appreciate in archaeological sites and pre-historic caves – e.g. the caves at Lascaux in France (Jean, 2010, p. 11).

Seventeen millennia later, “mankind’s most extraordinary achievement [occurred], the art of writing” (ibidem), in the shape of calculi (as records of accounts) or pictograms (for agricultural accounts) (idem, p. 12-13). From these stemmed cuneiforms, hieroglyphs or the runes, the alphabet introduced in the British Isles with the raids of the first Germanic tribes. With time, alphabets stabilised, suffered influences from invading peoples, adapted to new sounds and realities, but the yearning for writing down history as well as oral stories that had been passed on from generation to generation persisted and thus we have nowadays Homer’s *Iliad*, *Beowulf*, the story of the seafarer, along with numerous historical accounts, such as Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of England* and King Alfred’s *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*. However, history was not our ancestors’ only concern: religious texts were also their focus and to register the various gods’ words was essential in most societies. Consider, for instance, the Veddas or the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament).

Bearing in mind the fact that writing in itself was never alien to human history and nature, we intend to pay attention to the more literary side of using language, what is called creative writing, and reflect upon the role it plays in empowering students to develop and enhance their writing skills in both their mother tongue and in their foreign languages. However, it is not our intention to discuss the history of writing nor to establish a connection between writing and graphic means.

Our aim is, therefore, three-fold: a) to reflect upon the importance of telling stories, i.e. in creative writing; b) to discuss the role of literary competitions as a means to validate students’ work; c) and to describe the running of our literary competition, ascertaining at the same time the impact it had in our winning participants. We will tentatively put forward some conclusions and recommendations for the future.

CREATIVE WRITING

Creative writing, also known as the art of making things up, is an essential part of society, as we implied in the introduction by revolving around the need humans have shown to register their history and religions, and their stories. It is often considered to be outside “the bounds of

normal professional, journalistic, academic, or technical forms of literature, (...) [with] an emphasis on narrative craft, character development, and the use of literary tropes or with various traditions of poetry and poetics” (cf. Wikipedia, online). Due to these distinctive features, creative writing may be taught in short courses or even at the level of bachelor or master’s degrees. Short courses can be tutored by prestigious writers, such as the recent ones by Margaret Atwood or Neil Gaiman, and can focus on various text types – poetry, short stories, novellas or novels, as examples of fiction, and even non-fiction.

Within language learning, be it mother or foreign language (FL), creative writing is a means to unblock our lexical stock and activate it, but also it comes forward as a skill that must be developed from intermediate to advanced levels. In FL classes, it is usually used as an exercise to make students use recently learnt vocabulary, as a chill-out exercise or one that might be connected to a specific topic, for example, Space, which can lead to writing sci-fi short stories (forthcoming examples on Newsletter no. 8, October 2019).

It was from this pedagogical experience that sprung the idea of creating a Literary Competition, particularly as a platform for anonymously submitting original work of fiction to be assessed by a jury of language teachers that might validate and legitimised students’ yearnings. It is also grounded on the assumption that creative writing is one among many other sides that a proficient language learner needs to master.

LITERARY PRIZES AND AWARDS

It is commonly known that literary awards have been increasing dramatically in the last decades. For instance, the Nobel Prize for Literature has been running since 1901, among others that have been active for a hundred years or so. We can mention some other well-known prizes, e.g. Pulitzer, the National Book Awards, the Women’s Prize for Fiction and The Hugo Awards. Even the Internet has joined this trend and given a boost on the discovery of new ways to award writers, such is the case of the Goodreads Choice Awards.

At the same time, “we live in a moment of an enormous overabundance of books, which makes it harder than ever to place value on new cultural works” (Stinson, 2019) and, because of this, prizes have little effect in allowing readers to sort through the endless mass of books being published each year. It is quite the opposite: it encourages dispersion and confusion and imposes “the dominant means of literary taste-making” (Stinson, 2019).

The whole discussion around literary awards and prizes embodies what Rustin (2016) calls the double-edged impact of literary prizes: on the one hand, there is “the increased visibility, professional opportunities, and prestige that often come with literary prizes” (online) and, on the other, “an increase in authors’ bank account balances and the additional support from publishers that routinely accompanies awards” (online). It is then undisputable that, as Jervis (2017) states, literary prizes and awards are extremely relevant in today’s publishing world. This author provides the examples of the Costa Book Awards and the Man Booker Prize as a strategy for quickly capitalising these publicity-generating awards. For him, they are also a way to raise the profile of their writers and ultimately a publicity opportunity – he quotes Gavin Freeguard of The Orwell Prize that hints to the lack of transparency in many awards, since the entry fees required by several prizes lead to a more ambiguous outcome and is based on books that have already been published. In O’Connell’s words, “every time there is an announcement about a major literary award, there is always this low tumult of grumbling about all the great writers the judges have “snubbed” (2011, online). O’Connell (2011) goes as far as considering this a matter of arbitrariness that certain books are shortlisted by awards such as the Man Booker of the year, books that get coverage from the broadsheet newspapers and would never be read had they not won the award. As a result, he stresses out that “[t]he whole idea of awards is not really compatible with serious consideration of literature in the first place” (O’Connell, 2011).

Therefore, the question posed by many authors discussing this issue is whether awards and prizes are a valuable asset for both writers and readers. According to Mendelsohn (2013), “[w]e want awards to be clear markers of excellence, but if anything they repeatedly demonstrate that there are no absolute standards for judging aesthetic matters” (online). That is why “[t]he literary prize as an institution has been suffering from what the scholar John Guillory has called “the ordeal of middlebrow culture” (cit. Szalai, 2013, online).

As Rustin (2016) puts it, awards offer “an undeniable sense of external reinforcement by lending literary creators a reinvigorated sense of legitimacy”. Despite the fact that not all set out to do this, a number of awards and prizes do wish to support first-time and uncommissioned writers, allow for a career change and have their writing validated, an opinion conveyed by the three winners of our competition interviewed (see below).

Stinson (2019) summarises the advantages and disadvantages of literary awards and prizes. Regarding the former, these are: “generating publicity and media discourse, especially around announceables like longlists, shortlist, and winners; increasing prestige for a small group of authors and their publishers; and increasing book sales for a small number of authors and their publishers” (online). As for the downsides, they include: “encouraging substantive criticism,

analysis, or discussion of books; engaging with or providing a sense of literary history; and generating useful, defensible, or coherent literary traditions” (online).

Bearing the abovementioned, the Literary Competition at our school was developed in view of the upsides of literary awards and prizes in general, that is the support of first-time writers, who in this particular case were undergraduates, to raise their profile and visibility and, hopefully, to open new professional avenues.

ESEB'S LITERARY COMPETITION

The Literary Competition of the School of Education celebrated its fifth anniversary in 2019. It started off as a somewhat far-fetched idea of the Department of Foreign Languages to enable students of languages, as well as those of other degrees of this school and of the other schools of the IPB, to give free rein to their imagination, creativity and writing ambitions. Not only was it supposed to foster students' work and provide it with a formal context of assessment and thus validation, but also encourage(d) less assertive students to gain their courage and just give it a try. Moreover, another of the premises for this initiative was to raise the possibility of students to convey their stories in a myriad of languages apart from Portuguese, that is French, English, German and Spanish, the languages that are currently offered at the IPB, particularly in our school.

During the first three years of the competition, between 2015 and 2018, the focus was on the short story, which, according to Encyclopaedia Britannica, consists of “brief fictional prose narrative that is shorter than a novel and that usually deals with only a few characters” (Hansen, online, n.d.). It was only in 2018, under the yoke of our conference on microfiction (“Pequenos Transatlânticos: microrrelatos nas duas franjas do Atlântico”), that we made the decision to broaden our scope and allow the participation of poetry and microfiction. This fairly recent form of writing has a rather unsettled terminology, since we come across terms such as microstories, short-shorts, sudden fiction, nanofiction, among others (cf. Newsletter of the Foreign Language Department, no. 7).

The beginning of the competition was not as straightforward as might be expected. We chose to advertise this event by means of posters made available in the five schools of the IPB and emails sent to the IPB's mailing list, even though these not always had the effect we intended. In 2018, we created a website (cf. <http://concursos.linguas.es.eipb.pt/>) where all the information and regulations for the Competition are available, as well as the indication of the

winners of the previous editions. In terms of the prize, we opted for a ticket to a summer festival, usually in July, that would be an extra motivation for students. Throughout these five years, we have witnessed a steady increase in the number of entries, especially since 2018, sometimes from the same author and covering the three available options, and we can safely state that the competition has become part of the school and students' lives.

In hindsight, we can present the following data: in 2015, there were five short stories entered, none of which came from students of languages but rather from degrees such as Basic Education, all of which were written in Portuguese. An interesting point to highlight is that one of the stories was the result of collaborative work by a group of students. The following year marked a change of tune: from the nine stories participating, two of them were written in English and the remainder in Portuguese, and language students braced up the challenge and participated. 2017 was the least positive year for the competition, since we only received two entries, both in English. As mentioned above, 2018 introduced a broader variety of typologies and also of the number of participants: five short stories, two microstories and seven poems. At last, in 2019, we had the application of three short stories, two microstories and eleven poems (some shorter than others). If in the first three years only one prize was needed, once we broadened the spectrum of participation, so did the number of entries and necessarily the quality of the prizes. We introduced three prizes that were intended to comprehend the different texts, and we added a ticket to a local rock festival for the second prize and a set of books for the third prize. It is also worth mentioning that French, German and Spanish have not yet been among the languages in which students write for the purpose of the competition.

Table 1 summarises the abovementioned information.

Table 1 - Overview of the winners in the five years of the Literary Competition.

	Title	Language	Typology	Winner's name
2015	"Felizardo Infeliz"	Portuguese	Short story	Sara Lucas
2016	"Limbo"	English	Short story	Pedro Amorim
2017	"The hour of the devil"	English	Short story	Pedro Amorim
2018	"Africanidade"	Portuguese	Poetry	Fábio Costa Alegre
	"Claws"	English	Short story	Pedro Amorim
	"Forlorness"	English	Microfiction	Teresa Leão
2019	"The golden boy"	English	Short story	Teresa Leão
	"Too late – The play"	English	Poetry	Thamyres Felipe
	"Poemas"	Portuguese	Poetry	José Ribeiro

OUR WINNERS: INTERVIEWS

In the context of this paper, we considered it would be of the utmost importance to seek our winners' opinion about the competition, but also to yield an insight into their motivations, the pros and cons of the event and the impact that it will bear on their future. The questions were as follows:

- 1) What were your motivations to participate in the competition?
- 2) Could you tell us the pros and cons of the literary competition, or writing in general?
- 3) How did you feel before, during and after the competition?
- 4) Will you use the experience you gained from his literary competition to your advantage in the future?

The interviewees were made to Pedro Amorim, Fábio Costa Alegre and Thamyres Felipe (please check their full interviews in Annex 1) for two main reasons: first because they were the winners of our most recent competitions (2018 and 2019) and thus easier to get hold of, and secondly due to the fact that they were students from our language courses.

As far as their motivations are concerned, the winners identified writing as a serious and enjoyable hobby, an escape that enables them to express and deposit their feelings, as well as a change to make their writing public. Two of the interviewees were approached by a member of the organisation of the competition to participate. In terms of the pros of the competition in itself, they mentioned the following: convincing people that writing is not only for nerds and old people, contributing to the school's reputation and status and being able to present their work for other people to validate, whereas the cons focused more on the nature of the competition, which is very much local and with a low profile that has not yet allowed their work to be published. Regarding their overall feeling, they admitted to having felt joy in what they did and hope in the prospect of winning since it was a personal test, alas pretty good about the whole process. Finally, concerning their future, they believe that it was a very good contribution, that increased their writing arsenal and that it will enable them not to second guess their skills. It is worth mentioning that one of the interviewees emphasises an idea put forth by the authors referred to above: that not all prestigious writers were recognised and published in their own time and thus being a laureate is not necessarily a synonym of writing grandeur and quality. In a nutshell, all interviewees uphold the idea that the experience was rather pleasurable and will have a lasting impact on their future.

FINAL REMARKS

In this paper, we focused on the idea that writing, in general, and creative writing, in particular, are vital for humankind and life in society. In pedagogical settings, creative writing is another skill to be developed and mastered, especially with language learners and thus the reason to create the Literary Competition at the School of Education.

Nowadays the mushrooming of literary awards and prizes seems to become derogatory for winning writers, so that some authors speak of an ordeal and a publicity stunt that mostly benefits publishing houses and bookshops. In spite of this conundrum, a school literary competition brings about all sorts of advantages to students, whether they are language students and nurture a desire to write, or they are students who enjoy writing as a hobby. Ultimately, it is a way to empower students and enhance their skills, providing them with an extra motivation for carrying on with this activity, not to mention the enjoyment of their prize.

We also described the procedures followed in our five-year-long competition and presented their participants and enquired three of our winners about their views. Regardless of them being largely positive and appreciative, there were two aspects mentioned that we believe makes perfect sense to heed and change in the future: the fact that it is a rather local competition, and thus having little visibility, and that none of the works has been published.

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Annex 1

A) Pedro Amorim's interview, winner of three competitions in a row:

Q1: *My motivation has all to do with the fact that I love writing; it's a rather serious hobby that I truly enjoy, so, for me, competing in the literary competition made perfect sense. When I was approached, I thought that it would make perfect sense, testing myself against other writers and the same time doing what I love and to the university. Yes, that's about it.*

Q2: *About the pros and cons, it's easier to say the pros than the cons in my opinion. The pros just to start with, you get to do something that it's honestly quite fun. Most people think that writing is not fun, that is something really boring, that only nerds and old people do but it's actually a pretty nice thing to do. Once you start trying it out, as long as you write something of your interest; it depends if you enjoy fantasy or science fiction or history or something else, what you truly enjoy you should write that. By doing that in the literary competition I would personally classify that as a pro in itself; the other pro is the fact that you are actually contributing to the school that is actually giving you your actual degree. Regarding the cons, that is tougher to say. The only possible con that I can think of is the fact that you are actually wasting a lot of your time. I wouldn't say a lot but a significant portion, so if you do not enjoy writing that might be a con in itself; if you do enjoying it, it's not a con and I would personally say that there's no cons at all.*

Q3: *Before the competition I didn't feel much different; I only felt as if it an extra challenge had been added. I felt challenged, I guess, that I should truly give my best to this competition, but honestly I did not feel pressure at all, just a continuation of the hobby of writing that I had. It wasn't really that serious; it wasn't a thing that really pressured me or made me feel uneasy or anything of the sort. I just felt it was something fun I was going to do and, quite honestly, I had no idea that I was going to win, nor did I care that much. I was just there for the fun. Now, after the competition, I do have to admit that I felt pretty good about myself actually, because it felt as if the little effort I made to the competition actually paid off, that had I actually managed to win it. At the same time, I also felt that I was somewhat validated as a writer, even though the competition is not something internationally famous or anything of the sort. I reckon we can call it a local competition, though it is still something very nice to validate you if you enjoy writing.*

Q4: *Any writing experience is a very good contribution to your overall experience as a writer so, definitely, I would say yes to the question. It will help me out in my future writing for sure. Every single story, every single piece of fiction or non-fiction contributes to your writing arsenal, so indeed I would use it.*

B) Fábio Costa Alegre's interview, winner of the first prize in the 2018 competition:

Q1: *Honestly, it was motivated by a teacher of mine... She motivated me to show my skills to the public. Before, I only showed my texts to the African community exclusively in Africa's day.*

Q2: *There were some advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are: giving the competitors a chance to show their skills and to be analysed by experts and have their opinion about our skills. Also, we would be stimulating our imaginations – I always wondered how big writers like Stephen King and J.K. Rowling have such great imagination. I remember myself reading amazed and simply fascinated by Harry Potter books. How can they imagine those stuff and made the readers captivated like that?! The disadvantages would be: the low profile of this competition and I would love seeing an essay or a book of mine published somewhere as the prize, although my prize was awesome!*

Q3: *Honestly, I wasn't expecting to win. Just to have fun and some extracurricular experience... It was kind of a personal test to myself.*

Q4: *Of course! I felt so confident the moment I was receiving my prize. I posted it everywhere for weeks! I was absolutely amazed with the fact of winning after trying only once!*

C) Thamyres Felipe's interview, winner of the second prize of the 2019 competition:

Q1: *Literature has always been my escape, ever since I was a teenager. I wrote to express my feelings, deposit my pain, vent out. Over the years, I fell in love with poetry writing and got better at it. I then sought feedback and tips from my professors and decided to give a shot at the competition. I didn't win my first-time round, but it doesn't hurt to fail when you're doing what you love. My competitive*

spirit made me work harder and better my writing skills and my teachers' continuous motivation had me submit more of my work for the competition, which I don't ever regret having done.

Q2: This is a rather hard question to answer, but in my opinion, the cons are the same as they always have been ever since the earlier years. Not all authors today considered prestigious were recognized and given much importance to in their own time, how much more today, with the number of readers only decreasing as we speak. It is now even harder to be successful writers when social media keeps taking up even more time out of one's life. However, there still are pros. To me, I write because it frees my soul. I like to think of words as paint and blank pages as canvases ready to be turned into deep, inspiring, beautiful works of art. It is a way to leave behind your own identity, maybe even a little bit of your soul. The biggest pro of writing though is the hope that someone will read your words and understand your heart.

Q3: Before the competition I had my mind focused on competing alone, but my mindset was filled with the hope of winning during the competition, I had heard I was good and that made me desire a positive outcome. When I did win, I was surprised, feeling I hadn't deserved it because I hadn't given my best. So after, I've been having the feeling that if I keep improving, I can be taken seriously and get somewhere with my work, for real.

Q4: Without a doubt, I will work even harder and not second guess myself nor my work. I will certainly compete more and encourage others to do so too. Winning once doesn't mean one will always win, but that's the best part, it isn't about the win. It is the joy that comes along with it, the feeling you get of being noticed and scored by people with higher understanding of the field and that score being a positive one. It makes you believe in yourself and I will use that very same feeling to my advantage as a way to never give up on literature during my generation (the so-called Nutella generation) but, instead, strive to give it more life.