

# Task-Based Creative Writing through Visual Advertisement: A Change of Attitude

**Salim Yassami**

PhD Candidate, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad  
yassami\_s@yahoo.com

**Mohammad Ghazanfari**

Associate Professor, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad  
m.ghazanfari23@gmail.com

**Reza Pishghadam**

Associate Professor, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad  
rpishghadam@yahoo.com

**Azar Hosseini Fatemi**

Associate Professor, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad  
azar.h.fatemi@gmail.com

## Abstract

Almost little is known about creative writing. In this research, creative writing has been introduced as an alternative to academic writing. The aims were to introduce creative writing as an alternative to academic writing to boost the participants' attitude towards writing in general. The participants were 32 senior university students studying English Translation at Islamic Azad University, Tehran. The study includes two phases: quantitative and qualitative. For the quantitative phase, the participants were given a questionnaire so that the researchers could measure their attitudes about writing. Then, a creative writing pretest was administered, followed by a posttest to see to what extent the treatment could help the participants improve their writing skill. For the qualitative phase, a videotaped oral interview with the participants was closely examined to find out about the participants' attitudes towards writing. The means of the pretest and posttest indicated a three-fold increase in the scores after the treatment was over. The oral interview, furthermore, showed that most participants had a negative attitude towards creative writing. It was finally concluded that creative writing might be considered as a useful asset in academic contexts, expected to alleviate the negative attitude of learners towards writing to feel more confident.

**Keywords:** Academic Writing, Creative Writing, Visual Advertisement, Writing Attitudes

## **1. Introduction**

Creativity is talked about in different fields, yet, due to its versatility and subjectivity, it has challenged scholars to come up with a unanimous definition. It is a concept prevalent in almost all fields (music, sociology, linguistics, mathematics, etc.). Mumford (2003) believes that creativity involves producing novel and useful products that did not exist before.

In the field of linguistics, creativity has touched writing to a great extent. One reason is that creativity needs time to develop; the other reason is its permanence and durability through time via writing (Engle, 1999). May (2007) states that creative writing is considered to be a distinct academic field, having its own unique courses, programs, and scholars all around the globe.

Engle (1999) defines creative writing as any type of writing that moves beyond the boundaries of professional, academic writing. It has three main distinguishing elements: a) a focus on narration, b) character development, and c) use of literary devices. Witty and La Brant (as cited in Marksberry, 1963, p. 32) believe that creative writing satisfies:

1. The need for keeping records of significant experience (intrinsic motivation),
2. The need for sharing experience with an interested group (writing as a social act),
3. The need for free individual expression which contributes to mental and physical health (therapeutic effect).

Nevertheless, the field of creative writing is still very young and we are just starting to accumulate glib theories on the creative process and how we might venture to teach it as a separate academic discipline.

To have a deeper understanding of creative writing, one might be interested in delving profoundly into its history, the main approaches to

### *Task-Based Creative Writing through Visual ...*

creativity, creative writing pedagogy, and the practical application of theories to classroom context (May, 2007).

Moreover, Fagan (2010) states that creative writing is used in many genres, such as plays, movie scripts, short stories, poetry, fiction and non-fiction writing, drama, radio drama, and many others. One main element of creative writing is the use of figures of speech (Harper, 2010).

Holman and Harmon (1986, p. 203) define figures of speech as “the various uses of language that depart from customary construction, order or significance in order to achieve special effects or meanings”. To exemplify, they quote a line from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*—“Rome, thou hast lost the breed of noble bloods.” Figures of speech are normally based on addition, omission, transposition (transferring) and permutation of the original meaning. Idioms, metaphor, simile, hyperbole, personification, alliteration, euphony, allusion, and so forth are among the well-known figures of speech. Another crucial ingredient of creative writing is aesthetics, dealing with the nature of beauty, its creation and appreciation. It is the study of sensory-emotional values, that is, the judgment of sentiment and taste. All in all, aesthetics is concerned with a critical reflection on art, culture, and nature.

## **2. Related Literature and the Rationale of the Study**

Amabile (1979) in an attempt to evaluate artistic creativity of his study’s participants took advantage of creative writing topics to unlock their artistic potential. He found that the creative tasks did indeed enhance the participants’ artistic creativity to a great extent but did not have any effect on their attitude towards writing. In the same vein, Daniels (1994) took advantage of creative writing to develop the participants’ individual voice in his literature class.

He concluded that creative writing was an asset to establish unique voice in his participants but did not actually influence their attitude towards writing. Neither of the two scholars mentioned above acknowledged literary devices as a probable source to develop creativity and boost attitude in writing. Fagan (2010) acknowledges, theoretically, the importance of literary devices in teaching creative writing, yet he expresses his uncertainty if these devices would actually influence and boost creative writing ability.

Radavich (1999) introduced creative writing in an academic context to see if it influenced the participants' attitude towards writing or not. To his disappointment, at the end of the treatment no noticeable and meaningful change was witnessed and he concluded that creative writing did not really have any impact on the participants' attitude towards writing. To develop one's creativity, we need to pay a detailed attention to the idea of visual literacy (Avgerinou & Ericson, 1997; Moore & Dwyer, 1994). Green (2006) defines visual literacy as a set of abilities and skills that empower people to detect, analyze, assess, use, and produce images. These skills let learners to comprehend the contextual, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, and technical constituents used to produce visual materials. Any given person who is visually literate is both an acute consumer of visual media and a sharer to the visual knowledge of the society. Bamford (2003, p. 4) states that a visually literate individual is able to:

- Determine the nature and extent of the visual materials needed,
- Find and access needed images and visual media effectively and efficiently,
- Interpret and analyze the meanings of images and visual media,
- Evaluate images and their sources,
- Use images and visual media effectively,
- Design and create meaningful images and visual media,

### *Task-Based Creative Writing through Visual ...*

- Understand many of the ethical, legal, social, and economic issues surrounding the creation and use of images and visual media, and access and use visual materials ethically.

Moreover, advertisements are replete with opportunities to bring into consciousness the idea of visual literacy, hence enhancing the creative ability of those who are exposed to such material (Debes, 1996). To the researchers' best knowledge, there has been no study on the effect of creative writing on learners' attitude taking advantage of visual advertisement. Thus, the scarcity of research on improving learners' visual literacy via teaching creative writing has encouraged the researchers to carry out this study.

Furthermore, reviewing the literature on creative writing shows the scarcity of research on the role literary devices play in developing students' creativity in writing. Visual prompts are also neglected to a large extent in university writing classes at the expense of ignoring the visual intelligence of learners. In this article, the researchers have introduced creative writing to university students through task-based activities that revolve around literary devices. The vessel through which creative writing has been taught to the participants is visual advertisements replete with literary devices that boost creativity. Simply put, the researchers wanted to see if teaching literary devices improves creative writing ability of the participants and whether taking advantage of visual advertisements to introduce visual literacy helps them develop their creative power in writing or not.

To investigate the topic and to achieve the objectives of the study, the researchers posed the following research questions:

1. Does teaching the application of "figures of speech" in writing help EFL senior students improve their creative writing skill?

2. Does teaching creative writing through applying literary devices in visual advertisements change EFL senior students' attitudes towards writing in general?
3. Does teaching creative writing through visual advertisements improve EFL senior students' visual literacy?

### **3. Method**

This study comprises two distinct, yet interrelated, stages - namely, a qualitative phase (consisting of interviews, journals, and portfolios) and a quantitative phase (consisting of questionnaires, a pre- and a post-test). In the upcoming parts, the two phases are introduced and described separately. What comes next is the information about who the participants were, the materials used, and the procedure employed to carry out the study.

#### **3.1. Participants**

The participants of the study were thirty-two (five male and twenty seven female) senior students of English translation at Islamic Azad University of Tehran, the South Branch. They were between 21 to 48 years of age, selected through a convenience sampling. They all had passed two courses on writing (paragraph development and essay writing) before attending a summer course on creative writing, an extracurricular optional course on developing their writing skill.

## **3.2. Material and Instrumentation**

### **3.2.1. Attitudinal Questionnaire and Oral Interview**

An attitudinal questionnaire was developed as part of the quantitative phase of the study by the researchers to assess the participants' attitudes towards writing both in their mother tongue (Persian) and in English. The participants' attitudes towards creativity and sharing ideas with others were also assessed through the same questionnaire. Furthermore, all the participants were interviewed (videotaped) by the researchers on ten open-ended questions as part of the qualitative phase of the study for triangulation or compensation for the probable shortcomings of a Likert-type questionnaire.

In order to measure the internal consistency of the attitudinal questionnaire, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was employed. The obtained result for the questionnaire regarding its internal consistency turned out to be 0.74, which is considered to be a satisfactory index.

The validation process of the questionnaire was based on Alderson and Banerjee (1996) as well as Converse and Presser (1986). The two main validation processes for the questionnaire were content and construct validity. In order to establish the content validity of the questionnaire, a team of three experts were asked to give their judgments on the extent the questions were representative of writing attitudes. Furthermore, the experts commented on the wording, punctuation, and instructions of the questionnaire. To check the construct validity of the questionnaire, 7 university students agreed to attend a think-aloud strategy phase in answering the questionnaire. After the completion of these two stages, necessary changes were made in the structure of the questionnaire.

At the end of the validation process, the researchers came up with 24 items tapping six components of attitude in writing. Table 4 below shows the six main

components in the questionnaire, their related items and their reliability indices.

To check the construct validity of the questionnaire, the researchers assessed the suitability of the data for factor analysis. To determine the appropriateness of the data for factor analysis, two criteria must be met; 'sample size and the strength of association among the variables' (Pallant, 2007, p. 180). After pinpointing the factorability of the data, factor analysis was run based on Principle Components Analysis (PCA). In order to make sure about the number of factors to keep, the Kaiser's criterion was selected, according to which only the values of 1.0 and above were selected. The six factors accounted for 81.14% of the total variance. According to Jolliffe (2002), any result above 60% is considered acceptable. The total variance of these six factors are as follows:

How much I write in Persian: 18.31 %

How much I write in English: 22.28 %

How much I feel confident writing in English: 10.72 %

How much I know enough vocabulary and grammar in English: 8.59 %

How much I am aware of creativity in writing: 7.81 %

How much I consider writing as fun: 4.29 %

### **3.2.2. Pretest and Posttest**

The participants were asked to write about a topic which tapped their level of creativity. The purpose behind the pretest was to measure the participants' knowledge, command, and level of proficiency in writing creatively, so that the researchers could trace any change in the level of creativity when the treatment was carried out. The criteria in the writing assessment were chosen based on

### *Task-Based Creative Writing through Visual ...*

the four criteria of IELTS writing module, adding creativity as the fifth element to assess the participants' pretest and posttest:

- Task Achievement
- Coherence and Cohesion
- Lexical Resource
- Grammatical Range and Accuracy
- Creativity (applying literary devices)

Each criterion was assigned 20 marks and the overall score was 100.

### **3.2.3. Tasks (the treatment)**

The core of the research was a series of newly-designed tasks to trigger creative writing, to help the participants improve their skill in writing creatively. Fifteen tasks containing a number of literary devices and textual techniques to tap creative writing were developed: cohesion, coherence, writing vividly, alliteration, paradox, euphemism, hyperbole, flashback, portmanteau, metaphor, allusion, foil, symbolism, ambiguity, and neologism, each task constituting a single unit to be discussed in one total session as part of the treatment. In each unit, moreover, on the basis of the topic, a number of grammatical points and cohesive devices were chosen to be introduced and highlighted. For example, in the unit on 'paradox', inversion was chosen as the related grammatical point to be taught. Furthermore, the participants were asked to write a composition about each topic. The compositions were then collected and commented on by the researchers and were given back to the participants for the re-writing phase, during which they were supposed to write again by paying attention to the comments given.

As a warm up, a general-discussion topic was given to the participants, after they were divided into groups of 3 to 5 people. The aim was to activate necessary words the participant would need to use as the unit unraveled (the brainstormer step). In the second step (the enlightener step), the literary device was defined and introduced to the participants to ensure their overall understanding of the topic of the unit. Then, a controlled task-based exercise was given to the participants to make sure they have grasped the literary device in question. In the fifth step, called the vista, the participants watched a visual advertisement in which the literary device of the unit was applied in the context.

In the main task, called the core, the participants would have the opportunity to re-watch the same advertisement and then would get engaged in completing the task accordingly. This main task had been designed in a way that required the participants to apply the literary device in the real world; for example, in the unit on paradox the participants were asked to leave the class, walk around the adjacent alleys and streets of university and take some pictures with their cellphones about the paradoxes they noticed in the neighborhood (for example, a homeless sleeping next to a high-rising building, leaflets on selling ready-made MA and PhD theses and dissertations on the university billboards!).

The penultimate stage was the activation part in which the participants used the words and structures they had learned to write a short text about the pictures they had taken in the previous stage revolving around the topic of the lesson. When they were done, they swapped their text with a group member to obtain their opinions and suggestions for the betterment of the text. The final stage happened outside the classroom on the way home. The participants were asked to take pictures about their surrounding so that they could use them as a

### *Task-Based Creative Writing through Visual ...*

source to develop their writing by taking advantage of the literary device under discussion, and structures they had learned in the unit. The example below provides a clearer picture of what is meant by this last stage.

#### *Figure 1. A Sample Assignment on ‘Alliteration’*

In the next session of the class, before the new unit was taught, the participants shared their waywork and homework with their classmates to find out about each other’s opinions on the assignment.

### **3.3. Data Collection Procedure**

#### **3.3.1. The Quantitative Phase**

The quantitative phase of the data collection consisted of two means of obtaining data: the attitudinal questionnaire and the pretest/posttest part. The attitudinal questionnaire on writing was the first means of collecting statistical information about the participants’ opinions and feelings towards writing. The numerical data obtained in percentage showed the level of their interest in writing both academically and creatively in Persian and English. After that, the pretest and posttest on a creative writing topic were given to the participants and scored by three raters (the maximum score assigned to each paper was 100) to find out where each participant stood in terms of their ability before and after the treatment on creative writing (Table 4).

#### **3.3.2. The Qualitative Phase**

The participants were asked to keep a portfolio in which they kept their end-of-session creative writing assignments after they were provided with the feedback

given by their classmates (a sample of which was presented above; see Figure 1, above). Then, they were required to hand in the assignments to the teacher for correction; then, they were supposed to rewrite the text and include both versions in their portfolios. Also, each unit had its own separate pictorial assignment, for which the participants were given a bonus credit (thus, to develop their visual literacy).

The score assigned to the participants' homework was out of a maximum of 100. The sample score sheet attached to all the participants' portfolio was as follows:

Sample unit

“Foil” is a device to introduce a character opposite to another with an aim to project it against a backdrop of opposite traits. Foil is a literary device to project a character by comparing it with another character similar in some essential traits but contrasting deeply in others. The proposed structure for this unit was:

1. The Brainstormer: Talk about your childhood heroes and villains; the protagonists and antagonists of books you have read and heroes and villains of the movies you have watched.
2. The Enlightener: The students are asked to read the definition of ‘foil’.
3. The Workout: The students are introduced to five sets of opposite adjectives they need to match (about the task in the brainstormer) and use them to go through the next task.
4. The Skeleton: Inversion and cohesive devices showing the contrast are introduced to the class.
5. The Vista: The visual advertisement about a movie (Mr. Brooks) is given which is about a popular character who is a notorious murderer at nights.

### *Task-Based Creative Writing through Visual ...*

6. The Core: The trailer (movie advertisement) of Batman and Joker (the foil characters) is shown and the task based on the trailer is introduced.
7. The Activation: A voiceover and an excerpt are prepared by the students using the points they have learned in the unit.
8. Waywork and Homework: The participants are asked to trace the opposites they see in their whereabouts on way home, for example, a slum area standing close to magnificent chateaus. Such scenes may be considered as instances of a paradoxical society we are living in. The participants use the structure, words and major points of the unit on foil to write a free report about their observations. They are also asked to take some photos if they feel the necessity.

#### **Figure 2. A Scene from 'Mr Brooks'**

Mr. Brooks is a movie about a successful businessman who suffers from bipolar personality disorders. The theme of this movie lends itself to one of the creative writing topics (foil), in which one dark character (the villain) gives meaning to the hero of the movie. The trailer (a kind of visual advertisement) clearly depicts the idea of foil to the participants.

## **4. Results**

The results obtained are qualitative and quantitative in nature. The quantitative results are presented first.

## **4.1. Findings of the Quantitative Phase**

### **4.1.1 Attitudinal Questionnaire on Writing**

The writing attitudinal questionnaire was given to the participants to see how the participants generally viewed writing. The first column represents the six categories under which the questions were developed, the second column demonstrates the percentage of agreement about each category by the participants. The last column summarizes the main examples and reasons the participants provided for their answers.

In the attitudinal questionnaire, each category was followed by four questions each having four alternatives. If a participant totally agreed with the questions the researchers scored it 4; however, if the participants ticked the 'disagree' side, the score given to it was 1. The value for each alternative is as follows:

Totally agree: 4

Agree: 3

Neutral: 2

Disagree: 1

The results above in percentage indicate the positive answers participants provided. As the table above roughly indicates, writing creatively and confidently is welcomed by only a minority of the participants. The above data was confirmed in the interview phase that was subsequently conducted to ensure the researchers about the reliability of the participants' answers in the attitudinal questionnaire.

### *Task-Based Creative Writing through Visual ...*

#### **4.1.2. Pretest and Posttest Results**

As mentioned before, a creative writing topic was given to the participants as a pretest to see where they stand on writing creatively. To check the homogeneity of the participants Levene's test with the significance level of 0.05 was run; the result showed that the significance value is 0.26, so the homogeneity of the group was established. The tables below provide the inferential statistics of the pretest and posttest:

The mean of the creative writing pretest was 14.56 and after the treatment phase there was a significant change to 48.43 in the posttest (table 5). A 2-tailed t-test was also run on the pretest and posttest obtaining a mean of -33.87 with the standard deviation of 15.81 and the standard error mean of 2.79. A cursory look tells us after the treatment there has been more than a three-fold increase in the participants' creativity repertoire. One might cautiously reach a rough conclusion that the treatment on creative writing with the purpose of increasing the level of creativity in the participants' writing was to some extent successful.

#### **4.2. Findings of the Qualitative Phase**

The main purpose of this research was twofold: introducing creative writing (using literary devices as one of its ingredients) to learners and changing their attitude towards writing. Both qualitative (interviews, journal and portfolio) and quantitative (pretest and posttest score) data collection were used to analyze the information obtained in this research.

In the qualitative phase, before starting to teach creative writing (the treatment) the participants in the oral interview stated their lack of interest and enthusiasm about writing and how monotonous and tedious it gets:

Writing is so boring, I waste my time when I write. Why should I write when I don't like it and don't enjoy it?

. . . I'm not interested in writing at all because I don't use it in my life and it is very boring ; only the teacher talks and I should just listen . . . I want to talk more . . .

. . . I have no reason to write because the topics I need to write are very not real and I don't have information about them and the teacher asks us to write something but we don't know how to do it and we don't know the grammar and words to use . . .

The three sentences above quoted from the pretest oral interview show students nowadays prioritize speaking over other skills (and normally writing is the last item in their list!) In this article the lead-in part of each unit (the brainstormer) was designed to usher the participants to speak using the words and expressions in that part, as a result they had enough information to talk about using the structures related to each unit's topic. Also, all the creative writing tasks were related to the real world so the participants could relate to them and understand why they have to work on the tasks. Williams and Burden (1997) believe that when teachers explain the value and importance of any given task to learners, they will try to work on the task more often for they know the reason why and the value of doing so.

Furthermore, the task-based creative writing helped teachers practice a more learner- and learning-centered classroom by letting the participants work in pairs and groups to learn the point having the teacher as a facilitator. So, the activities created a varied ambience in the classrooms leaving the participants to discover the answers (discovery learning) and add their personal life to the tasks and the whole process of learning (individualization of learning).

### *Task-Based Creative Writing through Visual ...*

Ultimately, everyone had something to share based on their personal experiences in their life, motivating them to be engaged in the learning process.

At the end of the treatment, the same oral interview was conducted and here are what some of the participants shared:

I am so into writing now, it is a great experience and you know what? I am waiting to have another experience like this because I think writing is my thing!

. . . I didn't have any idea writing can be fun too; I thought it is another boring class about writing but it was meaningful and I liked the part that we talked a lot and used the related vocabularies and grammar which made a logical meaning to me . . .

. . . It was enjoyable to see how writing and literary devices are used in advertisement; I haven't watched anything in the writing classes and when the teacher played advertisements in which the words and expression we had learned were used it made sense . . .

. . . I am more aware of the literary devices used around me, for example now that I read newspaper headlines or read the summary of movies there are many examples of the literary devices that I learned in this class . . . it is very enjoyable and fun.

. . . Nowadays when I write in my diary I feel healthier and happier; my writing is more beautiful and I feel that I can write anything that I want; I feel more self-confident in writing . . .

The participants enjoyed the process of creative writing because of the fun (Edutainment) they had while studying; also creative writing tasks were full of speaking opportunities for the participants to improve their speaking skill (integrating skills) while focusing on the writing skill too. The mélange of speaking and writing created a sprightly atmosphere in which the participants broke free of the boredom usually attached to writing courses. Adding visual

advertisement tapped another intelligence of learners for most of the time in writing only learners' linguistic intelligence is paid attention to; however, by using visual input one of the main Multiple Intelligences (visual intelligence) was brought into the picture.

Furthermore, the tasks and assignments were directly related to the real world and what they have learned was tangible for them because they saw what they have learned in the real world and its usefulness was apparent to them. Therapeutic effect of writing (diary keeping) also was one of the reasons that encouraged the participants to pursue creative writing and taking it seriously.

## **5. Discussion**

As stated before, in the studies carried out so far literary devices were ignored as an invaluable device to introduce and improve creative writing skill. Also, integrating visual input to both increase creativity and visual literacy has not been the focus of any research on creative writing. The three questions posed at the beginning of the research are also divided into qualitative and quantitative. The first question mainly tried to find if teaching literary devices help EFL senior students improve creative writing skill. The quantitatively meaningful difference between the pretest and posttest (14.56 vs. 48.43, respectively) shows that literary devices did indeed help the participants improve their creativity in writing. These two means were obtained based on the participants' pretest and posttest having three raters assess their texts. However, through the qualitatively-oriented oral interview the participants stated that the teaching of creative writing and the introduction of visual advertisement both changed their attitude towards writing and raised their awareness on the importance of visual literacy and the role it plays in our everyday life.

### *Task-Based Creative Writing through Visual ...*

Mostly, the participants had had the idea that writing is a laborious, fun-free activity that they had to grin and bear the whole experience. However, after the end of the treatment, they expressed the idea that having learned writing through visual advertisement with the following real-world activities did change their negative attitude towards writing. Adding literary devices,

as a crucial ingredient of creative writing, was an endeavor to bridge the gap in the previous studies that didn't pay enough attention to this element of creative writing. The introduction of literary devices through task-based lessons removed the fear of not knowing enough words and structures to embark upon the journey of writing creatively on the part of the participants; that is to say, the level of difficulty from pre-task to post-task increased gradually so that the participants felt secure and confident to continue writing.

The implications of the present study are manifold. First of all, teachers can take advantage of visual information to integrate with their writing classes to inject vitality, motivation and fun.

Furthermore, literary devices seem to have proven to be an invaluable asset in teaching writing creatively with their real-world applications, so that learners can feel the reason and usefulness of what they are doing in the writing classes. Furthermore, raising the learners' consciousness on visual literacy not only does help them appreciate the visual information around them, but also aids the teachers to unlock their students' dormant creativity talent. Last but by no mean least, adding creative writing to the mainstream education changes learners' attitude towards a seemingly arduous skill of writing.

## **6. Conclusion**

It is true that creative writing has gained momentum in recent years, yet studies have been focussing on creative writing itself, paying little attention to literary

devices as a crucial element in developing creativity in writing (cf. Fagan, 2010; Knoeller, 2003). Prior to conducting the treatment of the present study, a pretest on writing and an interview on the participants' attitudes towards writing were administered. Then, the participants were given the tasks designed by the researchers on creative writing centering on literary devices as one of the building blocks of creative writing. The results of the study showed that prior to the treatment, the participants had a negative attitude towards writing and didn't have enough knowledge and cognizance about creativity in writing. However, after the treatment both the qualitative (i.e., the interview) and the quantitative (i.e., the pretest and posttest) data indicated a positive change of attitude towards writing and an acceptable command on literary devices as an important element of creative writing.

Unlike other studies on creative writing, the researchers innovatively mixed those visual advertisements replete with literary devices to add an authentic real-world source and introduce visual literacy to the participants. The visual advertisements showed that literary devices can be used as a plea to write in the actual world by the learners. To put it another way, the literary devices in the context of visual advertisements could provide the participants with a kind of motivation to put into the practice of writing what they had already learned.

As the last point, it is worth reminding that creative writing at universities in Iran, like many other countries throughout the world, seems to be a rather new concept in need of further exploration and deeper contemplation. The impact of factors like 'multiple intelligences' and 'gender', for instance, on creative writing still appear to be under-studied and require further studies. Similarly, other genres related to creative writing (e.g., poetry, prose, short story, movie script, plays, and so on) still await more research studies to shed more light on this promising issue.

## *Task-Based Creative Writing through Visual ...*

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*Task-Based Creative Writing through Visual ...*