

Teaching Playwriting to University Level in Indonesia: Using Pictures to Develop a One-act Play¹

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Abstract

As a subject offered at the university level, playwriting can only elicit a lukewarm response from the Indonesian students compared to the other genres such as poetry and prose. Mainly due to lack of imagination and unfamiliarity with the elements of drama, the students feel discouraged at the very onset. This study endeavours to explore these barriers and suggest an approach that can help the students in overcoming them as proved by certain teaching experiments conducted in a playwriting class at English Department, University of Indonesia. A method that the present study heartily endorses is using pictures to help students develop a one-act play. The results show that carefully selected pictures can spark and hone students' imagination to develop more vivid characters and advance an interesting conflict-based plot. It also creates a dynamic learning process in which students' imagination and creativity are given a massive chance to develop. The findings of this study contribute to teachers who teach creative writing as well as general skills of English.

Keywords:

Creative writing, playwriting, picture stimulus, elements of drama, imagination

1. Introduction

It should come as no surprise to discover that only a minuscule proportion of university students majoring in English literary studies in Indonesia ever have the experience to read and write English drama. Compared to poetry and fiction, this literary genre seems to be less desirable. Many Indonesian students think that drama is tedious and obsolete. They also perceive it as something 'alien.' These attitudes show a vast gap between students and drama which in turn discourages them to read or to write one.

¹ The present paper was delivered on March 31, 2011 at the 2011 Asia Creative Writing Conference, Indonesia.

Students' lack of exposure and their strong aversion for drama makes the situation even more challenging in a playwriting class. In this country, it is too common to find students who give up when expected to write their own play in English. When I asked my third-year students about their feelings on writing a play, most of them described it as "overwhelming." One of the students unhesitatingly wrote in his journal, "*I have never written a play even in Indonesian, and now my teacher asked me to write one in English.*" This frustration might be the feeling that most students, especially in a non-English-speaking country like Indonesia, normally have. Students are aware that the task requires not only experience, but also a good proficiency of the language and a bunch of creativity. Meanwhile, they believe that creativity is something so special that only few extraordinary people are blessed with it. They feel that they are not as creative as the "gifted artists" that can write a piece of art.

In a further class discussion, I found that the main challenge the students face when writing a play is the lack of imagination. A number of students report that they frequently experience a writer's block. More often than not they lose their characters and can barely imagine the actions and the scene where the story takes place. Some also express a frustration as they do not even know how and where to start. Few of them, while feeling like they can manage to write a play, do not feel quite sure if their story has something "fruitful" for the readers.

Should we then draw a conclusion upon these findings that the students are not imaginative? In his article, *Imagination with a Small 'c'*, Alan Maley (1997, p. 8-16) acknowledges that students are indeed very imaginative, but they need a supportive condition and a tool to encourage their enthusiasm. Furthermore, he suggests that it is our responsibility as teachers to be willing to find a suitable approach or stimulus to tap our students' imagination and grow their potential creativity.

In choosing what stimulus can be used to help my students, I conjectured that a picture stimulus might be more effective than a print stimulus as pictures themselves are inevitable parts of students' lives in a way that printed texts are not. A more extensive study by David Sohn as cited in Leavitt (1968) found a pre-eminence of picture stimulus over a print stimulus. David said that studying

images can assist writing because it involves thinking and that the thinking powers developed through images transfer to writing. This visual aesthetic approach to visual aids has been developed and later extended by various art educators, literary critics, and practitioners. A study by Alan Maley and Alan Duff (2005) for instance, conceives pictures as “artistic wholes,” in which each part contributes to students’ perception of them as a powerful stimulus.

Following and developing upon these perspectives, I will then explore how using a picture stimulus can rouse students’ imagination to develop a one-act play. I will begin by explaining how this approach was conducted and then sharing one of the students’ works. It is hoped that the approach I support in this study can help to get students’ creative thoughts flowing.

2. Introducing Elements of Drama in a Context of Pictures

Although the subjects of this study were third-year undergraduate students, writing a play was still a new experience for them. Hence, I only asked them to write a one-act play. I thought this was the most logical and the easiest form for them.

In selecting the pictures for the activity, I avoided using a portrait of a person or several characters that did not provide enough illustration for the actions or conflicts. Instead, I chose ones that described several characters, particular settings, and ongoing actions. Such pictures guide the dramatisation closely, so the students can easily imagine the characters and actions. They also enable the students to concentrate more on the plot and the dialogue. I gave each group three pictures, or more, taken from scenes of a movie that was not really familiar to them. When I gave them the pictures, I told them that the pictures did not suggest a chronological order. They may decide which picture will start and end their play.

I began the lessons by reviewing some elements of drama such as characters, setting, plot, and theme. I next showed them the selected pictures and demonstrated how to see these elements when illustrated in a context of a picture. To make it more interactive, I elicited their ideas. For example, I asked them about who the people in the picture were, what they might be doing, and what

might happen to them. This imaginative process hooked the interest of the students and worked well as a pre-writing activity. Most of them were inevitably curious about the story behind the pictures and became encouraged to develop it into a play.

As a way to get the students on the practice of using this approach, I put them in small groups of four to five students, never more, and gave each group different pictures, along with a set of questions to help them elaborate the dramatic elements. Further I divided the lesson into three steps; (1) Working on the characters' description and background; (2) Working on the settings such as time, place, and mood of the play; and (3) Working on the plot development, conflict, theme, and dialogue. The first two steps were done in the first meeting, while the last step was given as a home assignment and discussed in the following meeting as it required much work.

These steps are important. If the lesson is not delivered in stages, the students will be overwhelmed by the excessive amount of work. The lesson also needs at least two meetings to complete if it is to be done properly. I will explain these steps further.

2.1 Focusing on the Characters' Background and Motives

As previously mentioned, I provided the students with a set of questions to help them dig up the elements deeper. The first set was designed to help students working on the characters. Since by this time they were well aware of kinds of characters and some techniques of characterization, I got them to focus more on developing descriptions and detailed backgrounds for the characters. Some of the questions were:

1. How old might the people be?
2. What might their occupations be?
3. Where are they from?
4. What are their names?
5. Do they have a family? What kind of family is it?
6. In what kind of neighbourhoods do they live?
7. What kind of a personality do they have?
8. What is a particular moment in their lives that affect them the most?
9. Who are the protagonist and the antagonist?

In order to explore the characters even more, the students were encouraged to think of the following questions:

1. How did the characters come together in the picture?
2. What do they want to achieve?
3. Do they face any obstacles? What are they?

These questions led the students to the background and the motive of the characters, which in turns gave them a hint about the possible conflict that might arise among or within the characters.

2.2 Building up the Settings

After developing the characters, the students examined the setting illustrated in the pictures such as the time, historical period, social surroundings, and place. At this point, the students studied the pictures and imagine when and where the events took place. I usually encouraged them to discuss the physical environment such as the buildings, streets, or landscape. Besides these physical settings, they worked on the atmosphere or mood of the play. One of the questions I used was, “What kind of feeling being portrayed in the pictures?” The explanation or description for this question can help the students sense the event itself.

When the students finished working on the characters and setting in the first meeting, they shared ideas with the other groups in class. They gave suggestion to each other on how the characters and the setting might be better.

2.3 Developing the Plot and Integrating the Whole Elements

The last step was working on the plot of the story including the theme and the dialogue. As I have explained, this step was given as homework so that the students could have more time to think and to draft their story. However, the same as the previous steps, I handed out some questions to help them. First of all, they had to work on the theme. They could think of what their play was about and more importantly, what they wanted the readers to learn from it. This would set up the purpose of the writing to help them create a story with values.

Next, the students were asked to imagine some possible ways to develop their plot. I allowed them to develop the plot as they wanted it to be. They could have a traditional plot² or an absurd one as in Becket's. Some of the questions I used to guide them in developing the plot were as follow:

1. What is going on?
2. Are there any conflict situations, and who are involved in it?
3. What has probably happened?
4. What will happen next?
5. How will the play end?

It should be noted that I let the students decide whether they wanted to tell the events chronologically or begin their story with the last event and later explain what led up to it. They could also exclude the exposition and begin in the middle of the rising action, presenting some conflicts then describe what happened earlier through dialogue or monologue. Indeed, I gave them a freedom to develop the story so the writing process remains enjoyable for them.

Furthermore, the students were challenged to convey the story by using dialogue. Here, they needed to think of what the characters might be saying to each other or to themselves, and how they would say it. It might be useful at this point to remind them a little bit about manner, gesture, facial expression, or movement. By doing this, they would be able have a livelier action in their mind, and it helped them with the stage direction as well. Overall, the sets of questions designed in these steps were aimed at getting the students not only to explore the elements of play in the pictures, but also learn how to use the reinforcement among these elements to develop a one-act play.

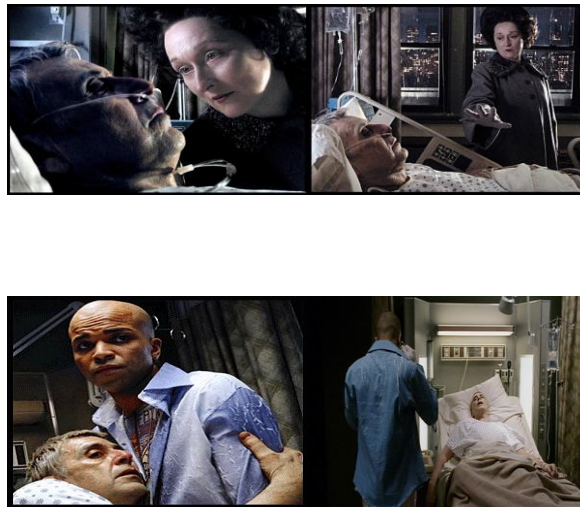
After each group presented the first draft, they gave feedback on each other's work again. However, I tried not to give too much adverse criticism here because I wanted them to write at ease. The students could use this moment indeed to get insights from their friends. Based on what I had done in class, this motivated the other groups who had not yet put much effort in their works.

² A traditional plot encompasses four sequential stages such as exposition, rising action, climax or turning point, and resolution.

3. Findings and Discussions

After the students wrote their final draft, I collected their works along with a journal of thoughts that they had while they were working on their own play. A number of things impressed me as I read their plays and their journals. One of the examples is a play entitled *Heart Disease* which was developed based on the following pictures:

Figure 1. ³ Identifying Dramatic Elements in a Context of Pictures



It was a surprise that at the end they could come out with a play that is rich with conflict and enjoyable suspense. The following is the excerpt of the play entitled *Heart Disease*⁴:

In the middle of the night. Outside is raining and rather foggy in New York. In the centre of the stage is a spacious hospital room with a single bed. It's a first-class room. Some documents and business newspapers are strewn on the table beside the bed. Next to a big window is Charles sleeping anxiously in his bed. He's very sick. The spasm in his chest is getting worse. Something is disturbing his sleep, and he suddenly wakes up, screaming. Standing before him is a woman whose face is so pale and bonny. She is wearing a fifties hat and a long odd gown.

CHARLES : What are you doing here?
MARIA : Taking pleasure of your misery.
CHARLES : Get outta here! You... You are dead!
MARIA (*very fierce*) : You killed me. But... I'm back, Charles.

³ Unauthorized pictures taken from *Angels in America* the movie. Accessed from <http://www.flickr.com/photos/kasarda/3276122419/sizes/m/in/photostream/> on 02/06/2011 at 10:16

⁴ Go to the Appendix to read the full play.

CHARLES : I didn't! I've told you! I don't have anything to do with it! (*Holding his chest*)

MARIA : Why is it, Charles? Is your heart in pain? A heart disease. (*She rolls her eyes*). They said you've been drinking too much. But is it, Charles? Or is it because of something else?

(She comes nearer to Charles. Charles getting more nervous).

CHARLES : SHUT UP! I don't know what you're talking about! Don't come any closer! Stay away from me, you dead fish! Get outta here! GET THE HELL OUTTA HERE! (*to himself*) Where is Jimmy? I want Jimmy! Jimmy! JIM!

(Jimmy comes running. Then he pushes the bell against the wall, calling the nurse. Maria stops walking. She stares at them. Jim doesn't see her.)

JIM : What's the matter? Don't scream like that.

CHARLES (*still screaming*): I won't scream if you are not DEAF! Now get her outta here!

(Jim looks around and get confused. He couldn't see anyone else in the room, except Charles and himself.)

All in all, the students like this approach. Many reported it in their journals as “helpful,” “fun,” and “interesting”. During the activity, they demonstrated great curiosity and enthusiasm. Some wrote in their journals that they continued working on their play outside the class and even asked their family or friends for ideas. Some also browsed on the Internet for additional information they needed to build their story. All students went through a number of drafts to revise and refine their work even though they were asked for one draft only.

In addition to this, the approach considerably provides a bridge to language learning. Through the writing activities, the students began to understand how to express their ideas in written work. They were also encouraged to enhance their vocabulary. Furthermore, the students can practice speaking in English during the group and class discussions. They can learn how to give suggestion and express their opinion. From these multi-faceted benefits, we can see that this approach can help foster students' deeper appreciation not only of English literature but also the language.

4. Conclusion

As I have explained through this article, using a picture stimulus affords many advantages to both students and teacher. First, it evokes students' imagination in writing a one-act play. It helps them create vivid characters and settings and enables them to invent a story with engaging plot. Moreover, this approach illustrates a connection between a literary work and other curriculum areas that interest me such as language learning. I think such connections benefit my students too. It gives them an ample opportunity to improve their English and at the same time deepens their appreciation for literature.

Another great thing about using this approach is that I can motivate the students beyond my expectation. During the process they worked very eagerly, and almost without exception, their plays are so interesting that reading them is a joy. Even though their plays are not essentially a work of art, the art experience during the writing process is rewarding. *This*, in fact, is much more important than the product itself. The writing process and the accomplishment the students have achieved at this stage give them a sense of confidence. Now they are ready to try their hands in a longer play with a great heartiness. They even suggested me to use the remaining weeks for production, so they could learn how to bring a play to life.

To conclude, the approach I have been supporting in this article is one of the ways to take our students to the wealth of imagination. By fostering their imagination, they will become more aware of their own creative potential and begin to trust themselves to explore it. Indeed, all of them can exercise the creativity and be an artist in their own way.

About the Writer

Herlin Putri is a junior lecturer and a performance researcher at the English Department, Faculty of Humanities University of Indonesia. She is also a creative writer and a stage performer. She has worked on several productions with *Teater Sastra* (the oldest campus theatre group in Indonesia). Herlin is the founder and the art director of English Art Lab UI.

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Appendix

In the middle of the night. Outside is raining and rather foggy in New York. In the centre of the stage is a spacious hospital room with a single bed. It's a first-class room. Some documents and business newspapers are strewn on the table beside the bed. Next to a big window is Charles sleeping anxiously in his bed. He's very sick. The spasm in his chest is getting worse. Something is disturbing his sleep, and he suddenly wakes up, screaming. Standing before him is a woman whose face is so pale and bonny. She is wearing a fifties hat and long gown.

CHARLES : What are you doing here?
MARIA : Taking pleasure of your misery.
CHARLES : Get outta here! You... You are dead!
MARIA (*very fierce*) : I'm back, Charles. You killed me.
CHARLES : I didn't! I've told you! I don't have anything to do with it!
(*He's holding his chest*)
MARIA : Why is it, Charles? Is your heart in pain? A heart disease. (*She rolls her eyes*). They said you've been drinking too much. But is it, Charles? Or is it because of something else? (*She comes nearer to Charles. Charles getting more nervous.*)
CHARLES : SHUT UP! I don't know what you're talking about! Don't come any closer! Stay away from me, you dead fish! Get outta here! GET THE HELL OUTTA HERE! (*to himself*) Where is Jimmy? I want Jimmy! Jimmy! JIM!

(Jimmy comes running. Then he pushes the bell against the wall, calling the nurse. Maria stops walking. She stares at them. Jim doesn't see her.)

JIM : What's the matter? Don't scream like that.
CHARLES (*still screaming*): I won't scream if you are not deaf! Now get her outta here!

(Jim looks around and get confused. He couldn't see anyone else in the room, except Charles and himself.)

JIM : Boss, there's no one here but you and me.
CHARLES (*fierce*) : Are you saying that I am crazy? She comes again! I've told them to burn her, along with her treacherous husband. She must have risen from the ground. Did they really finish her? Did they check? I should have done it by myself. Look, look! She's still here with her yellow face and eerie, stupid gown! How come you can't see her, Jim? Look! (*Pointing his finger at Maria. Maria smirks at him. Jim looks even more confused*)
JIM (*calming*) : She's dead, Boss. She's already dead. I've told you. I saw our men burying her body.

CHARLES (*Overlapping. Still very fierce. Pulling Jim's shirt*): ARE YOU BLIND? I'm so going to fire you, so tomorrow your family will get back to the street and beg people for pennies!

JIM : No one says you're crazy. You're just... you're just terribly ill. Please calm down. The nurse will come in a minute. (*Grab the bell and pushes the button again impatiently*)

(*A nurse comes from the left side of the stage. She's holding a hypodermic needle. She doesn't see Maria either. Maria is sitting in a chair.*)

NURSE (*a bit panic*) : Is he okay, sir?

CHARLES (*yelling at her*): If I were okay, I would be in my office! Signing million dollar documents or attending CEO meetings or playing golf or sailing in my yacht and not here talking with you! (*Coughing. He's having trouble breathing now*).

NURSE : You'll breathe easily if you don't holler like that.

CHARLES : Shut up! You are just a nurse! Get me my qualified doctors! I've paid them a lot! Now where are they? (*holding his chest*)

JIM (*to the NURSE*) : I'm so sorry. He's just feeling unwell. He's seeing things again.

NURSE : You mean he's delirious? But the chart didn't mention that he's schizophrenic.

CHARLES : Shut up woman!

JIM : Is it because of the drugs?

NURSE : Maybe. For some people it can cause hallucination.

CHARLES : SHUT UP I SAID! I'm not delirious! If you can't shoo her, (*pointing at Maria*) I'll get out of here by myself. I wanna go home. This hospital drives me insane. It is full of dead people.

JIM : Boss, you are still weak. You must stay here.

CHARLES : I don't want to end up here! CHARLES ARCHIBALD won't end up in New York Hospital, wearing a cheap patient cloth while laying helplessly in this smelly bed! Even if my time has come, I'd die in my luxurious satin bed wearing my diamond suit and money for my warm, green blanket! And I'll rest in peace. (*Tries to stand up*)

JIM (*Panic*) : No, boss. You can't. You should stay here. (*To the nurse*) Please help him. Please.

NURSE : Y-yes sir! Right away! (*Taking something from her pocket and begins preparing Charles' right arm for an injection. Charles getting nervous about the needle. He screams again. Jim helps the Nurse to hold his body.*)

CHARLES : What are you doing to me? Jimmy, she might kill me when I sleep.

JIM : Calm down, Boss. We're trying to help you.

CHARLES : You too are trying to kill me! Just like her!

(Charles's body lamenting gradually after it's given an injection. He's half conscious now.)

- JIM : Will it knock him out?
NURSE : Yes. I am putting him on sedative. A painkiller. He'll be calm but also paralyzed for a while. *(Putting on a portable oxygen to Charles)*
JIM : Oh, thanks. *(Relieved)*
NURSE : Finally he settled and calmed. Even when he sleeps, he looks stony... and cold. *(Pause)* He's such a difficult person.
JIM *(Whispering to himself)*: Guilt is difficult to deal with, isn't it? You cannot undo your past. It haunts you. It ties you today and tomorrow. Oh, will I end up like him? If I have to go back to the street where I used to live in so I can be in peace, I'll do it. Money makes people mad.
NURSE : Excuse me?
JIM : Oh, sorry. I'm just... nothing. Forget it.
NURSE : That also happened yesterday, sir. At night he threw things and yelled to the wall as if he were talking to someone else. He kept saying, "go away, go away!" Oh dear God. What kind of life that this person used to have?
JIM : Less merciful than yours I bet.
NURSE : Doctors said he's dying, sir. He has a chronic heart cancer. *(Looking at Charles)*. I think we should call the doctor now.
JIM : Or a therapist. Or a priest. I don't think he needs any prescription or counselling. What he needs is redemption. *(He inhales and exhales deeply)*
NURSE : You must be very tired, sir. It's hard to look after sick people. Okay. I think I'll call the doctors in charge for him. *(Standing up and was about to leave the room)*
JIM : Wait, nurse. May I go with you? I want to discuss something with the doctors. And explain them this condition that I haven't mentioned before. *(pause)* I know he won't like it, but... I don't have any options. So... can I come with you to see the doctors?
NURSE : Sure. And this time please tell them everything about him. I mean, about his disease.
JIM : I see. Is it okay to leave him alone? *(Worried)*
NURSE : That's fine, sir. Just come with me. He'll remain like that for about an hour or two. You understand his sickness better than I do.

(Jim nods. Then both of them leave the room as noiseless as possible)

Not long after Jim and the nurse have left. Maria, who has been observing the room, begins slowly approaching Charles. Charles is on the bed, half conscious and paralyzed.

CHARLES (*weak*) : W-who's there? Jimmy? Don't leave me alone, Jimmy.

(*Maria gets as close as she can to Charles*)

MARIA : Look at you now, Charles.... Weak and you just spend the rest of your live on the bed.

CHARLES : Ma-Maria?

MARIA : Yes Charles! It is me. (*She touches Charles in the forehead*)

CHARLES (*wants to move his hand but he can't*): Leave me alone.

MARIA : You called me.

CHARLES : No. I didn't.

MARIA : You did. Every night. I should have rested in peace... with my husband. (*sad*). But you keep calling me. Still remember my husband, Charles?

CHARLES : Of course. That bastard spy who almost got me jailed.

MARIA : NO! He knew you, Charles. He knew how greedy and dirty you are! And he wanted justice for those people who lost their shelters for your own sake. And you killed him! As you killed them all. One village, Charles. Though you could escape prison, you can't escape hereafter. You belong to Hell.

CHARLES : He wasn't that good. He was *just* like me.

MARIA : He *was*. But then he changed. And you disliked it. This is your entire fault. Don't you dare to say that you have forgotten about your past!

CHARLES : I've done things in my life, but I never killed people. My hands are clean. (*smiles*)

MARIA : You had people done it for you. Your hands are as bloody as theirs, Charles. (*giving a sharp look*)

CHARLES : What are you looking at?

MARIA : YOU.

CHARLES : Get outta here.

MARIA (*touches the portable oxygen*): What will happened if I pluck this thing, Charles? Will your heart stop beating? *If you have a heart. (cold and cynical)*

CHARLES : Oh. I do.

MARIA : Bet it is rotten with dirty blood.

CHARLES : You're barking at the wrong tree, mad dog. Go back to hell and meet your husband!

MARIA : Watch yourself, Charles! You don't talk to me that way when I'm standing that near to you. This is life and death, Charles.

CHARLES : I *hurt*. My heart is in pain. But *pain* is life. You lost. (*Maria smiles*). Look at that big, disgusting smile. What you got to smile about, Maria?

MARIA : It's over, Charles. *You* lost. Jimmy will turn himself down to the police. I saw him. He will spill everything he knew about

you and your dirty business. He doesn't want to end up like you, Charles. Dying in shit. But I enjoy seeing that. I've been hoping to see you die more terrible than I did. Than my husband did. *(She is about to put off the portable oxygen. Charles starts to cry)*

CHARLES : No. I'm scared.

MARIA : That's exactly what I said to your people when they started burning my house, Charles.

CHARLES : Oh, God, I'm so sorry. I feel bad. Forgive me, Maria. It was a long time ago. Forgive me.

MARIA : IT'S TOO LATE! You never win, Charles. When you die, everyone will say that it is better if you had never lived at all.

CHARLES : No, no. NOOOOOOO!

(Maria plucks the portable oxygen. Charles suffocates then dies. Maria watches him, smiling.)

MARIA : Now I forgive you, Charles. *(She vanishes)*

The monitoring machine shows a flat line. Jim, the nurse, and some doctors come running toward Charles's bed. One of the doctors checks his vein and heartbeat. He shakes his head.

DOCTOR : He's just got a heart attack. I'm so sorry.

Jim inhales deeply. The doctors have the nurse turn off the monitoring machines and leave. Jim suddenly sees something strange with the portable oxygen, but before he can think any further, the nurse covers Charles' body.

END OF PLAY