

## The benefits and challenges of creative writing assessment in French: *Un geste pour un autre* by Jean Tardieu

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### Abstract

This article aims to highlight and defend the benefits of creative writing assessment in higher education language modules. While the latter traditionally prefer essay-like assignments over creative ones, creative writing allows learners to develop a great variety of academic and personal skills, such as intercultural awareness, cooperation, problem-solving, engagement with literary texts and self-expression. Specifically, this article analyses a summative written assignment that was given in a post-A-level French module at a British University based on the French playwright Jean Tardieu's (1903-1995) short comedy *Un geste pour un autre*. Learners received the beginning of this absurdist play and needed to complete it, while also incorporating three lines from the original play into their texts. The task invited them to demonstrate their understanding of theatrical conventions, engagement with the original extract, ability to write a coherent text, language skills (grammar, syntax, vocabulary, register), linguistic innovation, imagination and problem-solving. In addition to exploring the strategies used by learners to cope with the task, this paper highlights the challenges encountered by evaluators to mark creative writing assignments, notably the lack of suitable assessment criteria in their institutions. It also explores students' reception to such an unusual language assignment and offers some suggestions about how to better implement creative activities in the language curriculum.

**Keywords:** creative writing; assessment; theatre; Jean Tardieu; *Un geste pour un autre*; linguistic innovation; marking criteria

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## Introduction

How do you picture a writing assignment in a language class? Maybe a postcard or a text describing one's family at elementary levels? A professional email or an essay setting out the pros and cons of the death penalty at higher levels? In any case, it is rarely a song, a poem, a novella or a play. Higher education language modules have traditionally favoured academic writing skills and essay-like assignments, especially within more advanced levels, perhaps due to the credit given to rhetorical skills and rationalism, or simply out of habit. The emphasis is almost exclusively on structure, argumentation, analysis and synthesis, along with vocabulary, grammar and syntax, at the expense of creative competencies. Creative writing can be defined as a form of writing that goes beyond academic or professional aims to focus on the author and even on the writing itself; it encourages self-expression, imagination and linguistic innovation, and encompasses different genres, such as poetry, plays, narratives and diaries (definition inspired by Oxford Summer Courses, 2021).

This general lack of interest in creative writing contradicts the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, or CEFR. The new descriptors in the companion volume encourage "personal, imaginative expression in a variety of text types in written and signed modalities" (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 67). They stress the variety of aspects (e.g. everyday life, imaginative stories), genres (e.g. diary entries, imaginary biographies, poems, developed imaginative texts), the complexity of the discourse (from simple sentences to complex, flowing texts) and the use of the language (from basic expressions to a confident and personal style).

Research in education and second-language acquisition has corroborated the views of the CEFR and has highlighted the pedagogical, academic and personal benefits of creative writing. It enables learners to develop their voices and identities, to become more confident in their command of the target language – as well as of their first language – and to write for fun and not just to learn and be assessed; all these factors may, in turn, increase their motivation (Bara, Bonvallet & Rodier, 2011; Mouginot, 2014; Zhao, 2015; Hassan, 2019). Moreover, creative writing can develop intercultural awareness, such as a more genuine experience of other cultures (Hassan, 2019).

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Additionally, creative writing activities are often coupled with authentic literary texts, which can allow learners not only to better read and interpret these texts but also to make the genres and the meanings of these texts their own (Hall, 2005; Mouginot, 2014; Hassan, 2019). Furthermore, creative writing activities often entail a collective dimension and invite socialisation, whether through group activities or sharing one's text with fellow learners by reading it aloud (Mouginot, 2014). In short, creative writing can be used as a self-empowering tool (Zhao, 2015) thanks to which learners can enjoy expressing themselves and playing with the language that they are learning.

Accordingly, in this article, I want to defend the legitimacy of creative writing as a form of summative assessment in higher education. I thus provide an example of such an assignment that was given to post-A-level learners of French at Durham University (North East England) in 2022. After explaining the assignment and analysing students' strategies to deal with the task, the article discusses not only the benefits but also the challenges of assessing creative writing, notably the lack of specific marking criteria for creative writing in many institutions. It also examines students' reactions to the assessment and, finally, suggests a few ways to better implement creative activities in the language curriculum.

### **Example of a creative writing assignment in French: *Un geste pour un autre* by Jean Tardieu**

Owing to the numerous advantages of creative writing, the French section of the Centre for Foreign Language Study (CFLS) at Durham University has developed creative writing in its curriculum and extracurricular activities since 2019. The CFLS is an Institution-Wide Language Programme (IWLP) that offers modules in ten languages from beginner up to advanced levels. Language modules can be credit-bearing or extracurricular. The former are intended for undergraduate and postgraduate students at Durham University whose main degrees are not language degrees. Each course lasts 2-3 hours a week and is worth 20 credits. Learners are assessed with marks that count towards their degree outcome. On the other hand, extracurricular modules include a wider variety of languages and are meant for students as well as staff and

members of the general public. There is no formal assessment. Note that the French module in this article is credit-bearing.

The CFLS French section organised online creative writing workshops for learners, and masterclasses for teachers, and launched a creative writing contest for learners of French in a UK or Irish higher education institution in 2021, which was held for the second time in 2022-2023. It also plans to launch a module for learning French through creative writing at the start of the next academic year (2024-2025). Likewise, it already introduced creative writing summative assessment in 2019. These assignments have taken different formats throughout the levels, such as rewriting an extract of a short story as a dialogue (beginners' module) and imagining the ending of a short fantasy story (post-GCSE module).

The following assignment was the first of two summative written assignments that were given in the post-A-level (or equivalent) French module of the CFLS in December 2022, at the end of the first term. This assessment was worth 30% of the writing component (itself worth 60% of the module). Learners in this module should reach a low B2 level of the CEFR at the end of the module, which is characterised by autonomy and an ability to communicate spontaneously and in a relatively nuanced manner.

While the second written assignment focused on more traditional academic competencies, such as argumentation and essay structuring, this one notably aimed to develop learners' creative skills. The students were given the beginning of an absurdist play by the French writer Jean Tardieu (1903-1995) of about 1,300 words and were invited to finish the play in French in 450 words. Moreover, they had to incorporate three lines taken from the original play within their texts. The task was carried out at home and submitted online via the plagiarism detection software Turnitin within two weeks of receiving the instructions. To complete the task, students were allowed to use language tools such as the pedagogical material of the module, dictionaries (monolingual or bilingual, including online dictionaries), grammar books and so forth, along with carrying out (online) research to solve any lexical, grammatical, syntactical and cultural difficulty that they may have encountered. Translation software,

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collusion and external help (especially from native speakers), on the other hand, were forbidden.<sup>1</sup>

Before examining the assignment, I should say a word about the play and its writer. This play is called *Un geste pour un autre* (= A gesture for another). Like many plays by Tardieu, it is a short vaudevillian comedy that aims to critique society and language conventions through an astute writing device explained in a prologue. In *Un geste pour un autre*, Admiral Sépulcre comes back from his travels in the Archipelago Sans-Nom (= Nameless) where customs are different from Western ones. The play shows an example of a typical Sans-Nom social event at Madame de Saint-Ici-Bas, where people are given hats when they arrive (rather than removing theirs), sit on tables and enjoy coughing. One of the aims of the play is to highlight the arbitrariness of social conventions, but it also facetiously underlines what is considered to be absurd behaviour by Western standards.

Learners had been prepared for such an assignment throughout the term not only by short creative writing exercises but above all by learning about theatre and the lexis of the theatrical world (*répliques* = lines; *didascalies* = stage directions; *quiproquo* = misunderstanding, etc.) through different activities. They also read and watched another play by Jean Tardieu called *Un mot pour un autre* (= A word for another), in which characters do not use an expected word but another one, usually similar sounding, for comical effects. For instance, a female character exclaims: “*Fiel!... Mon zébu!*”... (Tardieu, 2009, p. 56) for *Ciel!... Mon mari!*... (= Bile!... My zebu!... for: Heavens!... My husband!...<sup>2</sup>), the stereotypical cry of the cheating wife when her husband comes home unexpectedly. Students worked in groups on the play and were therefore familiar with Tardieu’s style, humour and aims.

To be able to successfully complete the summative assignment, learners needed to demonstrate their command of various skills. Firstly, they needed to display their

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that ChatGPT was still relatively unknown at the time and, accordingly, was not the subject of any specific ban in the instructions.

<sup>2</sup> All translations are mine.

understanding of theatrical conventions, such as dialogues and stage directions. For instance, indications like “*Quelques minutes plus tard*” (= a few minutes later), used by some students, are not suitable for a play, as they comply more with a narrative genre such as a novel or a comic strip. Likewise, “*Ils toussent ensuite pendant deux minutes*” (= they then cough for two minutes) is unrealistic in a play because the audience will likely grow tired.

Secondly, learners needed to display linguistic innovation and imagination by engaging with the title of the play and, accordingly, its writing device. In other words, they should invent ludicrous customs and dinner conventions and/or make fun of our traditions. For instance, one student imagined the characters being shocked when the Admiral mentions that he is hungry and wishes to eat; another had their characters find out-of-tune instruments making the most beautiful music, while another one used hiccups as a sign of social merriment. This constraint can be problematic for students because it relies on their inventiveness, a skill that is not easily teachable. Learners may not know how absurd they can be and may not give free rein to their imagination because they feel like it would be inappropriate for an academic assessment. In students’ feedback about summative assessment, one of them highlighted this difficulty: “I was slightly nervous about going too over the top for fear of losing marks in [a] lack of understanding of what I was trying to say due to the nature of the task and the language barrier” (student 1). Other students may simply lack imagination. The teacher’s approach should therefore be to reward original ideas and inventions and not to penalise works that do not reach such innovation.

Even more challenging for learners was to write a coherent text that actively engaged with, and did not contradict, the beginning of the play and the three additional lines. This required a deep understanding of the source material and attention to detail. For example, in the excerpt of the play that the students were given, the guests sit on tables; having the guests standing or sitting on chairs at the beginning of their versions is at odds with the original text. This extends to the style and the register. In the original extract and the three lines, characters address each other formally (using the polite

*vous* rather than the informal *tu*); students must likewise follow this convention, although such a level of formality between friends may seem odd to them.

Let us turn to the strategies that students used to overcome the difficulties that they encountered. One of the main challenges of the exercise was writing a poem. The extract that was provided to learners ended as follows:

*MADAME DE SAINT-ICI-BAS : [...] j'ai demandé à Monsieur Grabuge de nous lire un de ses plus mauvais poèmes. [...]*

*MONSIEUR GRABUGE [...] : Voici une ode intitulée : Ode de Mer, d'inspiration maritime, comme son nom l'indique: je l'ai écrite un jour où j'étais particulièrement mal disposé: je l'ai donc dédiée à ma femme.*

MADAME DE SAINT-ICI-BAS : [...] I asked Monsieur Grabuge to read one of his worst poems to us. [...]

MONSIEUR GRABUGE [...]: Here is an ode called *Ode to the Sea*, of maritime inspiration, as its name indicates. I wrote it on a day I was particularly upset; accordingly, I dedicated it to my wife.

(Tardieu, 2009, p. 31)

The extract provides several clues: the poem is a lyrical one; it is about the sea; it may refer to the poet's wife; above all, it is bad. This latter element is essential because, while not all learners may feel they have the soul and the talent of a poet, writing a bad poem is within everyone's reach. Consequently, this part of the instructions, hopefully, made the task less daunting.

Students developed different strategies. A few of them alluded to the ode but did not reproduce it. For instance, one of them wrote: *“Dès que le calme revient, Monsieur Grabuge reprend son ode, même si personne ne l'écoute. Après quelques minutes l'Amiral l'interrompt”* (= As soon as it gets quiet again, Monsieur Grabuge goes on with



his ode, even if no one listens to him. After a few minutes, the Admiral interrupts him). This is twice underwhelming because this strategy both avoids the poetical challenge and does not meet theatrical conventions.

Others wrote a poetical text but not in verse. This case occurred more often than the absence of a poem, even in otherwise excellent texts. For instance:

*MONSIEUR GRABUGE, se tournant vers sa femme, dans un ton incroyablement monotone, il chante: quand je suis au bord de la mer, l'air est si froid c'est nuisible. Il n'y a pas grand-chose à faire, la vie est tellement pénible. Mais...*

MONSIEUR GRABUGE, turning to his wife, in an incredibly monotonous tone, sings: When I am by the sea, the air is so cold it is harmful. There is not much to do, life is so difficult. But...

The student has complied with all the instructions (the maritime topic, the reference to the wife and the triteness of the poem) apart from the lyrical nature of the text. In this other example, the poetry of the text is doubtless – there are even rhymes –, but the formatting indicates that this is prose:

*MONSIEUR GRABUGE, chantant: Grande mer, belle mer, pourquoi êtes-vous si en colère? Vous êtes puissante, c'est clair, mais arrêtez de vous fâcher si vite, vous êtes bipolaire! Ne coulez pas mes navires, n'intervenez pas avec mes batailles, c'est toujours une pagaille. Au bout du compte, vous n'êtes qu'une grande baignoire!*

MONSIEUR GRABUGE, singing: Great sea, beautiful sea, why are you so angry? You are powerful, it is obvious, but stop being angry so fast, you are bipolar! Do not sink my ships, do not meddle with my battles, it is always a mess. At the end of the day, you are just a big tub!



Many students, nevertheless, complied with the instructions and produced lyrical, nonsensical, comical and original texts, which showed linguistic inventiveness. For instance, the following poem masters humour, rhyme, metaphors and comparisons:

*MONSIEUR GRABUGE:*

*Oh belle mer! Sublime piscine.*

*Casserole d'immondices*

*Dans lequel on se perd*

*Comme elle hurle comme une sorcière qui*

*Remue une marmite de...de... miel!*

*Oh, merveilleuse mer, belle au-delà de toute attente.*

*Piscine puante, horrible, turbulente!*

*Et pas très agréable, du moins qu'on ose dire.*

*Ma mère est la mer!*

*Non, elle est encore pire!*

(spelling slightly modified)

*MONSIEUR GRABUGE:*

*Oh beautiful sea! Sublime pool.*

*Pan of rubbish*

*In which one is lost*

*How it screams like a witch who*

*Stirs a pot of... of... honey!*

*Oh! marvellous sea, beautiful beyond all expectations.*

*Smelly pool, horrible, turbulent!*

*And not very agreeable, at least as one dare say.*

*My mother is the sea!*

*No, she is even worse!*

A few students also wrote, probably unintentionally, poems that were reminiscent of the seventeenth-century French poet Pierre de Marbeuf's sonnet "*Et la mer et l'amour ont l'amer pour partage*" (Both the Sea and Love Share Bitterness), by playing with the sonorities of the words *la mer* (= the sea) and *l'amer* (= the bitter), as well as *la mère* (= the mother). Here is the first quatrain:

*Et la mer et l'amour ont l'amer pour partage,  
Et la mer est amère, et l'amour est amer,  
L'on s'abîme en l'amour aussi bien qu'en la mer,  
Car la mer et l'amour ne sont point sans orage.*

Both the sea and love share bitterness,  
The sea is bitter, and love is bitter,  
One drowns in love as well as in the sea,  
For the sea and love are not without storms.

The previous poem already used the wordplay *mer/mère*, but the following example fully embraces the pun *mer/mère/amer*, while also adding *maire* (= mayor):

*MONSIEUR GRABUGE s'éclaircit la voix :  
Ah, que je t'aime, la mer  
Ou peut-être je veux dire ma mère  
Les deux, vous êtes amères  
La mer tu es sucrée  
Ma mère, tu es becquée<sup>3</sup>  
Ode à ma maire  
Tu habites à la mairie en ville  
Ma mer, ma mère, ma maire  
(spelling slightly modified)*

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<sup>3</sup> This word does not make sense here.

MONSIEUR GRABUGE brightens his voice:

Ah, how I love you, sea

Or maybe I mean my mother

Both of you are bitter

Sea, you are sweet

My mother, you are nurturing [?]

Ode to my mayor

You live in the town hall in the city

My sea, my mother, my mayor

These examples show how creative students can be, even in the context of a summative assignment, when they are free from the pressure of writing a “good” poem. Even when their main degree is not literature-based, they show a confident command of poetical conventions, often using verse, rhyme, wordplay and rhetorical figures such as metaphors. The poetical result can be so impressive that the evaluator forgets that they are supposed to read a bad poem.

### **Challenges for teachers/assessors and learners**

How can language teachers/assessors assess such creative texts? After all, creative writing is often perceived as too subjective to be assessed. However, from the moment creative writing leads to a qualification, assessment becomes inevitable, as Violaine Houdart-Merot (2018, p. 83) claims in a book on the recent arrival of creative writing in French universities’ undergraduate, master and doctorate programmes. Assessment is indeed an integral part of a writer’s job, through bestseller lists, literary prizes and publishers’ decisions (or lack of response) (Houdart-Merot, 2018, p. 84).

The National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE)’s booklet *Creative Writing: Subject Benchmark Statement* claims: “An academic discipline which develops cognitive abilities related to the aesthetic, moral, ethical and social contexts of human experience[,] Creative Writing encourages divergent forms of thinking, where the notion of being ‘correct’ gives way to broader issues of value” (cited by Weldon, 2009, p. 170). The difficulty resides, indeed, here: creative writing aims to develop

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unconventional ways of thinking and expressing oneself, whilst assessment consists of standardisation and comparability. Teachers/evaluators in creative writing departments can partially overcome this issue by creating their own marking criteria that are suitable for the unique nature of the assessed texts.<sup>4</sup> However, language teachers/assessors must often use marking criteria specifically designed for essay writing with little room for modifications.

At Durham University's CFLS, there are four categories for all post-A-level written assignments used in all languages:

1. Content (20%), which includes task completion, but also the cogency of the argument and the depth of the analyses;
2. Coherence and Cohesion (20%), assessing notably the links within and between sentences and the organisation of ideas;
3. Use of Language (30%), focusing on the range of the lexis and idiomatic expressions, as well as the sophistication of structures;
4. Accuracy of Language (30%), which covers grammar, spelling and punctuation.

While the latter two criteria, which almost exclusively assess language skills, can be more easily adapted to creative writing assignments (although a sophisticated structure, for instance, may be at odds with a character's age/social status/instruction or the general tone of a play), the Content and Coherence criteria can generate more challenges. How can one assess the persuasiveness of the argument if no argument is expected? What if incoherence is an integral part of the assessment? The marker must be able to bend the given criteria with their own expectations. For instance, understanding the original text and theatrical conventions, stylistic conformity and original ideas were among the characteristics that were examined under the Content criterion. Likewise, the Coherence and Cohesion criterion included the natural and consistent flow of the lines. However, those criteria were not provided as transparently and with as much detail as the official marking criteria. They were simply included within the instructions, alongside the "disconnected" official criteria, under the heading "To obtain a 1<sup>st</sup>, you must...", without any scale.

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<sup>4</sup> Weldon (2009, p. 172) gives the example of Originality and Imagination, Use of language, Structure, Expression of theme and Maturity of style at Brunel University.

The issue with the rigidity of conventional marking criteria must be part of a wider discussion regarding the obsolescence of these criteria faced with the changing nature of the context in which learners complete any assessment. Is it still relevant to give so much weight to grammar and spelling when students can easily access spellcheckers that will correct virtually all their mistakes? The irrelevance is even greater when one thinks of the challenges that artificial intelligence software like ChatGPT represents. It would be useful to reach a compromise between the perceived fairness of standardised marking criteria and the appropriateness of criteria tailored to each single assignment. After all, teachers' aims should be to pass on intellectual skills that help learners critically engage with new situations within and without the classroom rather than generic formulas that are perfunctorily applied to every situation.

It is important to note that such assessments encountered a mixed reception among students. 17 out of the 59 students enrolled on the course answered the short anonymous written questionnaire in which they were invited to indicate whether they preferred the creative summative assignment or the essay-like one. Some students enjoyed the creative freedom that was given to them. They felt that the prompt, notably producing an original text fitting the constraints, was “more interesting” (student 2) than that of the essay-like assignment, while others found the assignment “fun” (students 1, 3 and 4), “challenging” (student 3) and “nothing like anything I had ever done before” (student 4). Student 5 also enjoyed the “greater creative freedom given”.

On the other hand, novelty and freedom seem to have destabilised other students. Four found the instructions “confusing” (students 1, 6, 7 and 8), probably due to a lack of familiarity with this kind of creative guidelines whether in the language that they study or in their mother tongue. They may also attribute the difficulty of the task to their own alleged lack of imagination. Unlike student 5, some students felt that the constraints of the task gave them less room for expression. In contrast, they enjoyed carrying out research and developing their argument. For instance, student 6 claimed: “The second [essay-like assignment] allowed me to use my own ideas more rather than trying to understand what someone else was trying to write”, while student 9

wrote: “The second written summative assessment allowed us to portray a more personal style of writing. The content we could have explored was also far broader and gave us more freedom”. Moreover, student 10 judged the marking to be more subjective, perhaps owing to the lack of specific marking criteria for creative writing tasks at the Department scale.

Finally, it is interesting to highlight the utilitarian approach of some students to language learning. Any activity must have direct, obvious repercussions on their degree or their future career, as student 10 pointed out: “None of it felt relevant to learning French that I can use later in life”. This may be due to the optionality of the module, as a few students may have chosen French with a specific goal in mind (such as pursuing their degree abroad), while those studying French as their main degree may do so owing to a general interest in French language and culture. Still, it is worth wondering whether the higher education system itself, with its marks and rankings, encourages this search for immediate, visible results at the expense of long-term, meaningful effects. If this is indeed the case, it is essential for teachers to have a large-scale discussion regarding the reasons why they assess students and what skills they want the latter to gain from their degree.

While students’ reactions may be discouraging, it is important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. They reveal that more preparatory activities are needed so that learners do not feel confused by the instructions or incapable of completing the task due to an alleged lack of imagination. The teacher also needs to explain how the department’s assessment criteria are used for marking creative tasks. Moreover, a reflective piece of writing in English in which students explain their aims and artistic choices could clear up any potential misunderstanding. Finally, it is paramount to make learners understand that assignments are complementary; one will assess their research skills and ability to set out an argument, while the other will assess other skills. Indeed, the variety of transferable skills (all relevant at the workplace and beneficial to their personal and intellectual development) that the creative task develops and assesses must be highlighted: intercultural awareness, critical thinking and problem-solving... not to mention creativity.

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## Conclusion

In brief, it is essential to communicate with learners the guidelines, the aims and the pertinence of such creative tasks, both the summative one and the many in-class exercises. They need to become an integral part of the language curriculum. Furthermore, a discussion within and between language departments regarding marking criteria for creative tasks is necessary to respond to students' legitimate requests for fairness and transparency in the marking process. This discussion should form part of a wider debate on the role of assessment in higher education. I believe that the complexity of creative tasks makes them a noteworthy alternative to essay-like writing at a time when artificial intelligence software such as ChatGPT is threatening universities' traditional evaluation systems. I want to finish by highlighting the pleasure that a teacher can derive from reading and marking stories, plays and poems, as opposed to essays, in which the same argument and the same examples are repeated over and over again. Our mission is now to make writing equally fun for all learners.

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