

# Defamiliarization in L2 Creative Writing

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## Abstract

Defamiliarization, as defined by Shklovsky (1916), is a literary technique of making the familiar seem unfamiliar. Since after time we tend to become somewhat desensitised to our surroundings and language, describing things clearly through written language can be problematic. Thus, a defamiliarization technique can be used as a short writing activity in L2 university level English writing classes to not only aid students in being awakened to the content to which they will write, but also in being creative with the English language and building their writing confidence, as they try out ideas in a risk-free environment, becoming more advanced writers of both fiction and non-fiction. The written work generated can be used for reading practise, discussions, and for editing purposes later on in their writing course. I will advocate the use of defamiliarization writing activities for L2 writing classes at Japanese university level for these very reasons. I will introduce the technique, detail the process, rules, and further activities than can be organised from this writing activity.

## 1. Introduction

Making students better writers should be the main aim of any university writing class, and there are many under-utilised activities that can support this. Life writing, writing genre fiction, and creative nonfiction are some of the writing challenges that students can undertake to build a solid writing portfolio. Another useful addition the instructor can add is a writing activity that involves the students using a technique known as defamiliarization. This activity is an individual writing task where the students are challenged to write about a familiar thing but make it unfamiliar to their reader in some way or form.

In my experience in Japan, the majority of students have never attempted this writing technique before, and it is a challenge when attempting it with a new cohort. However, trying a writing exercise such as this can help them develop their English writing skills, as they are using the language in new and creative ways, and thus is worth being included as part of an L2 writing curriculum. From my experience, it not only aids L2 students in being creative with the English language, but also builds their confidence, as they try out ideas in a risk-free environment, with the goal of becoming better writers. After becoming familiar with the technique, the students start to avoid unoriginal or predictable writing, which is typical in L2 creative writing classes. It also, as Roberts (2016) notes, has the benefit of adding clarity to vague instructions about showing not telling when writing stories. Rather than read a simple description of the action, the students will write

to enable the reader to fully visualize the story. As Anton Chekhov is famously reputed as saying, “Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.”

## 2. What Exactly Is Defamiliarization?

Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky in his 1916 essay *Art as Technique* argues that when we have seen something several times, we stop seeing it for what it really is. Since the object has become too familiar, in order to see it clearly, it needs to become unfamiliar again. This making of familiar things unfamiliar again is what Shklovsky calls defamiliarization and is what true art will do. He notes, using the example of art, that:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make an object unfamiliar, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (Shklovsky, p. 16)

Shklovsky further notes that we easily fall into a passive way of thinking and need to be re-awoken to the world that we live in. He uses an example from Alexander Pogodin’s 1913 essay *Language as Creation*. Pogodin wrote about a boy pondering the sentence, “The Swiss mountains are beautiful.” (Pogodin, p. 42) Shklovsky argues that after becoming passive, and only half-attentive at best, we perceive the language in the sentence in the condensed form of:

T, S, m, a, b.

Shklovsky takes Pogodin’s example beyond language in that we perceive things and objects in this exact way as well; we only pay attention to a condensed aspect of the object. This is a common factor in everyday life. If we are in a habit of only paying slight attention to the world, and everything within it, we lack awareness and are reduced to passivity. Thus, defamiliarization can make us move towards being active, as we see things that were previously thought unremarkable in a new light.

In *Art as Technique*, Shklovsky mentions Tolstoy’s 1886 novel *Kholstomer* and how it features defamiliarization. In the novel, the reader is forced to be aware that they are reading from a horse’s perspective. One of Tolstoy’s aims was to expose irrational human concepts, such as labelling things we have decided are ours – ownership of property and animals or even other people, and he used defamiliarization to do just that. Shklovsky notes that the horse, Serphukovsky, is killed off long before the story ends. However, the technique of telling the story does not change and the reader continues to be defamiliarized on things they take for granted and as a society have determined as normal.

Defamiliarization has not only been confined to Russian literature – it has been used in a wide variety of world literature and genre fiction, especially in the use of animals to shed light on human conventions. Orwell wrote comparative literature to Tolstoy in his 1945 novel *Animal Farm*. The story is told from the point of view of a group of farm animals and sheds light on how positions of power can lead to corruption. Similarly, in London’s 1903 novel *The Call of the Wild*, the narrator is an animal – a dog called Buck. The story, being from Buck’s perspective, focuses on the relationship between man and dog from the opposite

viewpoint we are used to and exposes the cruelty of humans towards each other and animals. We also find defamiliarization present in Richard Adams's 1972 anthropomorphised rabbit fantasy novel *Watership Down* and more recently in Laline Paull's 2014 dystopian novel *The Bees*; confirming that it is not a technique confined to past literature.

If done correctly, defamiliarization, as Roberts (2016) argues, allows for a shift in perspective and is a way of reframing the dull expectations of everyday objects. The writer can thus remove what Shklovsky terms the dreaded habitualization of life. Perhaps Swift's 1726 novel *Gulliver's Travels* is the earliest in literature to use the technique, and there are several examples of it in the story. One such example is when the protagonist, Gulliver, visits the giant Brobdingnabian race. After dinner, he sees a wet nurse and a baby. Gulliver describes the horror of seeing the giant naked breast of the nurse as she fed the baby.

"So varied with spots, pimples and freckles that nothing could appear to be more nauseous." (Swift, p. 6)

Gulliver, affected by defamiliarization, could no longer see her skin as he had passively seen female skin his whole life; instead he views it from a new strange and unfamiliar perspective.

This made me reflect upon the fair skins of our English ladies, who appear so beautiful to us, only because they are of our own size, and their defects not to be seen through a magnifying glass, where we find by experiment that the smoothest and whitest skins look rough and coarse, and ill colored. (Swift, p. 6)

Tolkien is a further advocate of defamiliarization. In his 1947 essay *On Fairy-Stories*, he argues the benefits of the fantasy genre and the positive benefits of defamiliarization that it brings. Two examples of this are when he notes that: "We need to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity – from possessiveness." (Tolkien, p. 67)

We should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red. We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses – and wolves. This recovery fairy-stories help us to make. (Tolkien, p. 52)

Ward-Niven, an academic advocate of defamiliarization, noted in her 2016 essay *Oddly Familiar: Strangeness as Illumination* that:

By allowing strangeness into our familiar landscapes – the everyday landscapes of our narratives, our characters and our language – we can surprise the reader into pausing, paying attention, and possibly recognising some kind of familiar truth in a new, illuminating way. (Ward-Niven, p. 2)

The defamiliarization technique seems complicated at first glance. Therefore, it needs to be simplified for the L2 students so that they fully grasp what they are undertaking and do not get demotivated before they start writing.

### 3. Introducing the Technique to the Students

The first stage is to introduce this concept of defamiliarization to the writing class. This is an important stage, and one to which the students need to give their full concentration. The focus is to open the students' eyes and for them to see normal things in a new way. Getting started is, as Shaughnessy (1977) notes, the most difficult of all writing problems. Therefore, this technique should be made clear to the students to minimise the barriers when it comes to testing out their writing ideas.

#### 3.1. Introduction A: Hot Leaf Juice

A simple way to introduce defamiliarization is to get the students to think about their own culture. For example, from my own experience teaching Japanese students, using the popular Japanese drink green tea has been successful. In pairs, the students have a simple discussion about green tea for two minutes and write words they associate with it. Afterwards, a scenario is set: a visitor from a far off country has come to Japan for the first time and has never seen or heard of green tea before. The visitor asks them:

"What's this you are drinking? Is it from the sewer? It looks like water with pieces of dirt in it, and it smells like urine. Green juice made from leaves? You drink hot leaf juice?"

The visitor then takes a sip and spits it out. "It's bitter, tastes disgusting, and makes your breath smell terrible. Why would you drink such a thing?"

The visitor's comments, however harsh about the product, defamiliarize green tea. For a moment, the students are forced to think about a drink they have been habitually passive about since childhood in a fresh way. They then in the same pairs will again discuss and write down vastly different words they now associate with the drink. This simple example can be similarly done for other popular Japanese cultural entities such as: *natto*, *takoyaki*, or *pachinko*.

#### 3.2. Introduction B: Occupations

The students can read a defamiliarized job description to a group of three and the others will guess what job they are describing. Examples of this could be: I kill things that smell nice then tie them up in little bundles (Florist). I heat dead animal insides in a thermally-insulated box and sell the hot flesh inside hot dough (Baker). I press buttons in a metal tube that rises to 30,000 feet in the sky and moves across the planet (Pilot). Shklovsky argues that defamiliarization, "creates a *vision* of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it." (Shklovsky, p. 18). Therefore, this simple warm-up gets them thinking more about the reality of an actual job and not just the name associated with it.

#### 3.3. Introduction C: Manga in English

Reading a passage or two of a post-1995 English version of Akira Toriyama's manga *Dragon Ball* or Sanami Matoh's 1994 manga *Fake* can also be used as further introductions to what this technique can do. The students learn to read English starting at the front of a novel and from left to right; everything the students read in English is presented this way. However, in the English translations of *Dragon Ball* and *Fake*, the text is presented in a more Japanese fashion, from back to front and from right to left, making the

students process the English text in an unfamiliar fashion. The students will not so much see the content defamiliarized. However, seeing the language in a different way is a good way to get them introduced to the feeling the technique that they will be undertaking should invoke.

### 3.4. Introduction D: Literature, Film, and Television

Alternatively, or in addition, the instructor can introduce the many examples of defamiliarization from pop culture, literature, film, or television. As noted previously with examples from Tolstoy, Orwell, London, Adams, and Paull, presenting animal life in a new light is a popular way to use this technique. Those authors take the reader into the world of bees, farm animals, or dogs and see and think how they could perceive the world, rather than being our food, pet, or simply an irrelevant creature.

Science fiction, in particular, is a genre in fiction that defamiliarizes its audience. Scholes notes in his 1975 *Structural Fabulation* essay that it is the new idea that shocks people into perception rather than language of the text. Matheson's 1954 novel *I Am Legend* presented a new idea that the protagonist Neville, a regular man who has been fighting off vampires that are trying to murder him throughout the novel, is actually the antagonist. This last human is the real monster in the eyes of the new dominant species (the vampires) on this future Earth. Similarly, in Boulle's 1963 novel and subsequent 1974 film, *Planet of the Apes*, the strange world that is dominated by intelligent apes turns out to be actually our planet Earth all along, but in the distant future.

In Japanese literature, Haruki Murakami makes use of the technique in several of his surrealist fiction. For example, in his 1982 novel *A Wild Sheep Chase*, he presents the idea that sheep can be more than just livestock we consume and use for clothing and can have more power over human life than we imagine. Similarly, Junichiro Tanizaki defamiliarizes the tattoo in his 1910 short story, *The Tattooer*. The story opens the reader's eyes to show that a simple tattoo can be more than just ink on someone's skin; it can affect both how they are perceived and how they perceive themselves.

In television, KIT, a self-aware AI that exists as a car in the 1980's television series *Knight Rider*, makes us think of cars in a new way and not as inanimate objects. Disney also similarly used a sentient car called Herbie in the 1968 film *The Love Bug*. Furthermore, Pixar developed the car idea further by having Earth void of people and dominated by sentient cars in their 2006 animation *Cars*.

There are many examples of defamiliarization and using any of them to introduce the students to the technique are fine, as long as the instructor can get the students to think of everyday things in a different way.

## 4. Writing Warm-Up

After the introduction, before the students get into writing a story, the class should do a simple writing warm-up to get into the habit of using the defamiliarization technique. For example, the instructor can put a winter scene picture on the board and give them a simple writing task: describe the picture in as much detail as you can. However, you must not use the following words: snow, white, sun, cloud, tree, or winter. They have to think of new ways to describe the image.

The students will come up with wildly different descriptions, depending on the vocabulary they have and their imagination, but this is what we want. The point of this warm-up is to get them to use unlikely

language and think about how they can describe things differently. After they have had one or two attempts at describing the picture, they can read their answers to each other in pairs and compare.

Another further option is a short writing exercise using photographs of people – which is also ideal for ‘show, don’t tell’ practise. Individually, the students choose a random photograph of a person or people and write a few sentences about it. The students should describe the people in the picture in not only looks but also what they think the characters are feeling. When the students are finished, they will read to a partner who has not seen the picture, and the partner will make a simple drawing of it from the description that have heard. What we are looking for here is not, “There is a sad man,” but rather, “The man’s eyes were red and his head sank towards his lap.” It is the same information but lets the other student visualise the writing.

## 5. Defamiliarize the Familiar

Once they understand the concept, the next stage is for the students to be challenged to defamiliarize the familiar by writing original stories on their own. They will write a short story with the end result of trying to get the reader to pay attention to something they would not normally. This does not have to be complicated – even the lowest level writing classes can tackle this successfully. It does not matter *what* the students describe – it is *how* they describe it and *how* they make it new for the reader. An example of this could be:

### A Summer’s Day

Underneath the shade of its living brother, Diane sat on the mutilated carcass of an oak tree. She smelled, through two small holes in the centre of her face, the scent of small, green organisms being decapitated by a man pushing a wheeled box full of toxic, flammable liquid. They exchanged short noises from larger holes at the bottom of their faces. A distant star in the sky sent harmful light and rays, damaging her skin. She took a sip of cold, caffeinated sludge and removed a block of white, rectangular tree flesh, covered in small symbols in black paste from her animal skin item holder. Her eyes glanced over the thin rectangles and she smiled, flicking through them, hallucinating the words into a story.

In this example, a woman reading in the park on a summer’s day has been defamiliarized. The reader is forced to think about a bench, grass, a lawnmower, the sun, coffee, a book, a bag, and reading in a non-passive way.

## 6. Rules

A simple set of rules should be put in place for this exercise:

### 6.1. Don’t Worry about Spelling, Grammar, or Punctuation

Pollard notes that: “Releasing your inner storyteller is more important than grammar, spelling, and punctuation.” (Pollard, 2013). For this activity, this is the direction the students should be taken – the story, and importantly the aspect of defamiliarization, is the focus. The defamiliarization writing exercise is not a grammar-focused language task; it is more about writing stories that get the reader to pay attention to something that they would not normally think about, and be creative rather than producing perfect sentences.

The students can check words in their translation applications and dictionaries if they so wish.



However, it is not vital for every word or sentence to be correct. The instructor should stress that it is acceptable to make these kind of errors as the focus is being creative with the language and trying out ideas to make the familiar unfamiliar. By setting the activity this way, students can, as Jacobs argues, concentrate on putting ideas on paper without concern about errors. (Jacobs, 1986).

## 6.2. The Stories Are Not Graded

Hyland (1998) argues that pressure from worrying about grading can hinder a student's writing output, both in complexity and quantity. The stories are of course informally corrected for errors, so the students can learn from their mistakes, but ultimately they are not graded; the emphasis is on their ideas. They are also unlikely to produce their best work on their first try. Therefore, for defamiliarization writing to be most effective, it needs to be practised on a regular basis. The last 15 minutes of a weekly writing class is sufficient and should lead to improvement. Again none of these attempts will be graded. Casanave (1994) notes that students are more willing to try out ideas in a risk-free environment. Therefore, students need to embrace risk in this activity and therefore the class should be set out to support that.

## 6.3. The Stories Do Not Have to Be Perfect

It takes time to get good at this kind of task, even for native writers. Therefore, the instructor should explicitly tell the students that perfection in the task is not what they should be aiming for. Rose (2009) suggests that students who aim for perfection the first time around are likely to seriously inhibit their writing. A defamiliarization writing activity is meant to get the students to think more about the world and the things perceived as normal, but not overthink everything to the point it paralyses their writing ability.

## 7. Further Activities

There are further activities the written work from the defamiliarization tasks can be used for. In the post-writing stage, the students can read their stories out loud to another student or to a small group in the class and answers questions about what they wrote. This workshop-style is good for getting students to think more about what they have written. Some students, however, are not fond of reading out loud as a class activity. Wilson (2010) notes from his research that students can get quite nervous, even stressed, when they have to present their work. In this case, if there are overly anxious students who are not comfortable sharing their work, they do not have to. The purpose of any good writing class should be to get the best out of the students, so creating a negative experience of any part of them class for any of them will not allow them to produce their best results. However, Wilson (2010) further notes that the experience of reading can be memorable and exciting for them, and may even improve their English, which he notes is always a nice side-effect. Megyeri (1996) argues that reading out loud not only increases vocabulary but forces students to proofread, and he thinks that we all need to hear our own work to understand and appreciate the flow of language. While Trelease (1994) argues that storytelling aloud fosters the desire to read independently, which is an important factor for an L2 writing class as the more the students read, the better writers they will become. Therefore, starting off in pairs is the best way to get students comfortable with reading their work, and see if they can move on comfortably to group work.

After they have read their work, there should be no critiquing from the other students – only simple questions about the story, which works well for getting them to think about things they might never have considered and gives them a chance to elaborate on one or more of their ideas. The students can also develop their stories into longer pieces, or edit them into shorter micro-fiction pieces.

More traditional creative writing warm-ups like freewriting, circle-writing, and prompt micro-fiction are good for getting students into the frame of mind of writing in English. However, compared to defamiliarization, these exercises do not shape the students' choice of words, rather they just expand on what they already know. Therefore, if the class goal is making the students better writers, it could be argued that defamiliarization exercises are a better option to practise.

## 8. Conclusion

L2 university writing classes in Japan need to open the imagination of the students and get them thinking deeper about the things they write about. A defamiliarization writing activity can help students see things with fresh eyes and aid this. By getting students to think more about the objects and scenes they are writing about, they should raise their English language ability in more ways than just adding to their vocabulary. Defamiliarization is a great technique that can help students become more creative with language and get into the habit of pushing themselves to becoming better writers.

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