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From everyday activities to creative tasks

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Introduction

Creativity is not for special days and not for a select few; it is a life skill we use on a daily basis. We combine elements of a language in a way that we have never heard before and express thoughts that are truly ours. We make decisions in situations we have never been in before, form our opinions on things we never knew of before. We improvise food we never ate before, find ways of using faulty objects we cannot replace, or use tools differently from their designated use. We are humans and we simply cannot help but be creative. This is how we survive. Why do we then think that creativity is something extra in our classrooms and not an integral part of what we do? Couldn't we integrate creativity into the everyday practice of our teaching?

In this chapter, I aim to give tips to teachers on doing just that: to integrate creativity into everyday classroom practice and typical language learning activities and exercises. I will use a framework of thinking that is used by many teachers around the world to think about and plan their lessons, namely:

- working with the language system:
 - presenting and practising vocabulary
 - presenting and practising grammar
 - improving pronunciation.
- working with skills:
 - developing speaking
 - developing writing
 - developing listening and reading.

While sticking to this familiar framework, I would like to show that small changes introduced step-by-step at different levels of teaching can gradually lead to a richer and more motivational, more creative learning environment for the learners and a more fulfilling, more rewarding teaching experience for the teachers.

With each typical classroom/coursebook activity discussed, I will use the following format:

- How is the activity normally done?
- What alternative do I suggest?
- How does the proposed change affect teacher and learner creativity?
- Adaptation, variation, extension – how can the idea be used in different ways?

Background to the activities

The activities in this chapter were designed with secondary and adult classes in mind and they are informed by a variety of current approaches including learner-centredness, holistic learning, multiple intelligences, neuro-linguistic programming, humanistic teaching and task-based learning.

Presenting and practising vocabulary

When teaching vocabulary, we normally aim to help our students to connect the form of a word with its meaning so that they can get to the meaning if they come across the form (they see or hear the word) and that they can come up with the form (say it or write it) when they have the meaning in mind. When we present vocabulary, we provide the form, spoken and/or written, and give some guide to the meaning through a context, images, objects, mime, sounds and verbal clues or by creating a situation in which the meaning is clarified. This often calls for a lot of teacher creativity, as they try to find ways to clarify meaning without using the mother tongue, but the students can do some of this creative work.

From meanings to words

Students present meanings of words they don't know in English.

Procedure

- Give students an example of what we mean by different clues for the meaning of words. For example, if your topic is *travelling by train*, choose the word 'train', give a simple definition, imitate the movement and sound of a train and show students a simple drawing of a train.

- Ask groups of four to six students to write down in their mother tongue five words on your topic that they do not know in English but they think would be useful to know, e.g. station, ticket office, seat reservation, timetable, platform, written in the students' mother tongue.
- Ask groups to provide clues to the words they have chosen. They can use drama, mime, sounds, drawings, gapped texts, paraphrasing – anything but the mother-tongue word.
- Ask groups to give their clues, one at a time. For example, students in a group pretend to be trains while some students make sounds like a loudspeaker and they sing the tune you hear before railway announcements in your country for the meaning of 'station'.
- Ask if another group thinks they have a clue for the same meaning. If there is a group with the same meaning, get them to give their clue, for example, 'You can get on and off trains here', or they show a picture they drew. Check with the first group if it is the same meaning.
- Ask students if any of them know the English word, and ask them to say the word. If not, provide the word yourself. Get them to repeat the word and write it on the board.
- Continue like this, asking groups to repeat their clues from time to time and say the word, to recap.

Variation

- If you have a specific list of words you need to teach, make a big poster/slide of the words in the students' mother tongue and ask groups to choose the five they want to learn the most.
- This technique can be used with any topic which students have some experience of and knowledge about.

Lessons from the box

Student-generated vocabulary games, activities and exercises.

Michael McCarthy claims that 'seven repetitions seem to be enough for most people to be able to memorise a word' (McCarthy, 1990: 117). Whether it is more or fewer depends on many factors, such as the number of new words, the quality of repetitions and the lapses of time between the repetitions. For a word presented to a student to become a part of their active vocabulary, we need to create opportunities for them to experience and use the word in a memorable way soon after the first encounter, and then at longer and longer intervals. Thus to keep a record of the new words is an important aspect of effective teaching. The easiest way is to have a word box in your classroom and ask a student every lesson to make word cards for the new words and put them in the box. The box then becomes the class's word bank, where you find the words that need to be recycled. Apart from using the words in skills work, recycling can be done at three different levels of creativity.

The teacher makes the game/exercise

Every now and then you can use the word cards to devise games and exercises. These may include:

- matching and dominoes, e.g. matching word to definition, word to picture, word to phonetic sign, two parts of a word, collocations, etc.
- pelmanism
- snap
- miming competition
- crossword puzzles
- word search
- word jumbles
- snakes and ladders
- gap-filling
- multiple choice.

See the links at the end of this chapter to sites that give you rules, tools and ready-made word games.

Students make a game/exercise using a familiar framework/rules

Once your students are familiar with a game or activity, they can provide the cards, boards, dominoes and the necessary task sheets for each other.

- Choose a game/activity your students know well, and get them to revise how it goes.
- Put them into small groups of about four to six. Give them a selection of word cards from the box. Tell them that their task is to make the game/activity using these words. Give groups the necessary art supplies (paper, cards, coloured pencils, etc.).
- When the games/activities are ready, get the groups to swap games and play each other's games.
- Ask groups to give feedback to each other on the games/activities they made.

Students invent a new game

This can be a class or school project/competition. Teams of about six students work together to invent a vocabulary game. Tell students that:

- the games have to be original
- teams need to write up the rules and make all the tools (board, cards, dominoes, etc.)
- there is a deadline
- they can organise a games session where they can play each other's games.

Presenting and practising grammar

Typically, grammar structures are presented to learners in texts written by a third party, most often the coursebook writer. The involvement in the procedure for the learner is limited to:

- understanding the use and the 'meaning' of the structure
- identifying it in the text
- generalising rules
- applying rules.

This procedure engages the learners linguistically and logically, which is a rather limited engagement given that our learners have a variety of skills, a wide range of experiences, and their own unique imagination and preferences for learning. The alternative suggested below results in a more complex engagement of the learner – thus a more memorable learning experience for most.

From blues to bliss

Presenting and practising the different uses of the past simple and past continuous with a personalised story.

Procedure

- Ask students to remember their previous day and find a time when they were a bit bored, tired, unhappy, etc. Ask them to write down this time of day on a sticky note and wear it, e.g. 'around six in the evening'.
- Get students to line up from the earliest to the latest time of day. Then make small groups of students who chose similar times. Ask students to share what they were doing at the time they chose and demonstrate it saying 'I was correcting tests around six yesterday evening. What were you doing around six?'
- Get groups to report to the whole class, e.g. 'Sue and Peter were revising the physics homework and I was washing up around six yesterday evening.'
- Ask groups to find a person or a group of people they think could have changed that time of day for the better for them, and write this name down, e.g. 'Superman.'
- Ask pairs to imagine that the person(s) really arrived and the changes their arrival caused. Ask them to write this down as a short story. Write the starting sentence on the board: ☹ ☹ were ___ing and ☺ was ___ing when ___ arrived.'
- As groups are writing their stories, monitor and help as needed. An example of a possible story: 'Sue and Peter were revising the physics homework and John was washing up when Superman arrived. First he did the washing-up for John in twenty seconds and then we did a lot of interesting physics experiments. We laughed a lot and we understood and learned everything easily. We were looking at some Superman comic books when we heard "Help! Help!". Superman said goodbye and left at once.'

Follow-up

- Get students to write them/part of them on the board and use them to explain the grammar, ask concept questions, represent them on a timeline, etc.
- Collect and redistribute them, making sure pairs do not get their own story back. Ask pairs to mime the story as other students tell the story.

- Collect them and make a grammar exercise using students' stories, e.g. put the verb into the right tense. Or ask the creators of the stories to make up the exercises themselves and then swap with another pair.
- Get students to combine all the stories into one adventure story.

Variation

- You need to find the appropriate context that relates students' lives and/or their imagination to the grammar point, e.g. a dream holiday for future continuous, or a report about arriving on a faraway planet for present continuous.

Improving pronunciation

Pronunciation is most often improved by recognition – repetition activities. Some form of this can be very playful, like using tongue twisters, which gave me the idea for this activity.

I'll twist your tongue

Students write tongue twisters collectively.

Procedure

- Choose some tongue twisters for your class (see the sites below). Cut them into smaller parts.
- Give each student a part of one of the tongue twisters.
- Get them to mingle and keep repeating their lines, and find other students with the same tongue twister and sit down together.
- Ask groups to put the parts in order, and then perform the tongue twister.
- Ask them which English sounds they find hard to pronounce and elicit the ones that are typically difficult for people in your students' country. Write the phonetic symbols of these on one A3 sheet each with an example of a word that contains this sound, e.g. /θ/ *think*. To the same sheet, add a sound that is in contrast with the first sound and an example, e.g. /s/ *sink*.
- Put the sheets on the walls/floor/desks or pass them around and ask students to write more words on the sheets with the same sounds. Add some yourself as you walk around and monitor.

- Put students into groups of four and tell them to choose one of the sheets. Ask the groups to write as many sentences as possible using words with the sounds on their sheet. They can use any of the words on the sheets or other words that come to them with the same two sounds. They can also add 'grammar words' as needed, e.g. 'The three silly Smith sisters think that the maths class on Thursday is awesome.' All the students should make a copy of the sentences.
- Ask students to decide who is A, B, C and D in their groups. Ask students with the same letter to sit together, taking the sentences they wrote with them. You'll have four groups (A, B, C, D) this way. If groups have more than eight members, subdivide them. This will mean that you'll have groups A1 and A2, groups B1 and B2, etc.
- Ask groups to put their lines together to make a tongue twister. They need to find the best order for their lines, and they can add to and take away from any line as they think best. They will all need a copy of the tongue twister they make.
- Ask them to write the group's letter sign on their copy of the tongue twister and return with it to their original groups.
- In their original groups, they then read out their tongue twisters and get each other to repeat them.
- Ask groups to vote for the tongue twister that they find the most challenging. Tally the votes and do the winning tongue twister with the whole class.

Follow-up

You can use these new tongue twisters in many ways:

- to raise students' awareness of different sounds: give (groups of) students cards with one of the phonetic symbols in the tongue twisters. Read out the tongue twisters. (Groups of) students stand up and sit down quickly every time they hear the sound on their card
- run a tongue-twister competition
- use them as a warm-up activity before a speaking task.

Variation

- To practise the stress-timed rhythm of English, you can use jazz chants in a similar way. After teaching some to your students, they can write their own.

Developing speaking

Typically, speaking activities fall into three categories:

- Students talk about themselves. They are asked to share facts about themselves, their feelings, ideas, opinions, etc.
- Students talk as someone else. They act and speak in a role. They receive some information about a situation, a problem, the character they are, etc. and they pretend to be that person in the given situation.
- Students talk about someone or something else. They talk about a situation/story they are not part of.

Students talk about themselves

Telltale objects

They identify with one of their own objects and talk about themselves in this role at a 'party'.

Procedure

- Ask students what objects they use regularly at home, at school and in their free time. Write the objects students mention on the board, e.g. plate, fork, school bag, maths book, mobile phone, computer, television, bicycle, toothbrush, ball, armchair, etc.
- Ask students to choose an object they have, e.g. they can choose 'computer' if they have one. Check who chose which object and make sure you have a good variety.
- Give students a sticky note/card each and ask them to write the object they have chosen on their sticky note/card and wear it.
- Explain that they are to become the object on their sticky note/card, i.e. they become their own plate, fork, school bag, etc. Give them a minute to imagine what it might feel like to be that object, e.g. their own plate, fork, school bag, etc. Are they a happy object? Sad? Clean? Dirty? Busy? Relaxed? Bored? Old? New? Write these adjectives on the board.
- Ask students to imagine that this is a party of their chosen objects. They will mingle and meet each other and chat with each other as these objects. They need to find out if the objects they talk to are happy, sad, clean, dirty, busy, relaxed, bored, old, new, etc. (refer to the adjectives on the board), and they will need to explain why they think so. To be able to do this, they will need to have a chat and ask each other questions. Demonstrate this with a student.

Example:

- Judit: Hello, I'm Judit's bathing suit. You are Joe's trumpet, aren't you?
 - Joe: That's right. Nice to meet you.
 - Judit: And you. How are you?
 - Joe: I'm a little tired.
 - Judit: Does Joe often play on you?
 - Joe: Yes, every day for several hours.
 - Judit: Good for you! Judit only takes me to the swimming pool once a week.
 - Joe: How long have you been with Judit?
 - Judit: Ages! etc.
- After the demonstration, ask students what adjectives could describe the objects (Judit's bathing suit: bored, neglected, old; Joe's trumpet: tired, busy).
 - Give students a time limit of about ten minutes to mingle and ask them to take notes. You may want to play some party music in the background.
 - When time is up, ask students which objects they found happy, sad, clean, dirty, busy, relaxed, bored, old, new etc., and why.

Variations

- In lower-level classes, only use two objects, which all your students have, e.g. half of the students become their schoolbag and the other half become their shoes. Students talk to each other in different object pairs.
- The basic idea of this activity is to aid students with, and give them an aim for, talking about themselves. This can be done in many different ways, e.g. through asking them to choose some coloured paper to represent an experience they had or through asking them to compare themselves to different objects, etc.

Students talk as someone else

Prompts for roles

When we would like our students to act and speak as a different person, we need to communicate to them who this person is and what the situation is. This can be done using different prompts.

Role cards exchange

When students speak in role as a different person, the question is: to what extent can I rely on my students' knowledge about the world, their experience and their imagination to be able to act in this role? If the situation is familiar to them, a short scenario may be enough. If it is something that the

students have little experience of, we tend to give them information on how to act and what to say, too. This, however, can be done by the students.

Procedure

- Explain the situation you want students to write role cards for, e.g. 'We are in a shop. The customer bought a T-shirt yesterday and at home they realised it was torn. The customer is now talking to the shop assistant that sold the T-shirt to him/her.' Have a chat about students' experiences in similar real-life situations.
- Put students into pairs and give them two blank cards. Ask them to write one of the characters on top of one of the cards and the other character on the other card. Ask them to divide the cards into two columns and then write prompts in the two columns, like this:

Customer

Do this	Say this
Show the hole in the T-shirt	I bought it from you yesterday. When I got home, I showed it to my mother and this hole was there.

- Give each pair a paperclip and ask them to clip the two cards together. Collect the cards and redistribute them. Make sure pairs do not get their own cards back.
- Pairs act out the situation using the cards as a rehearsal.
- Pairs perform their dialogues as others listen and say if they think the dialogue was acted out using the role cards they made.

Change of feelings scenarios

Short scenarios often work better if we impose some kind of limitation, as this gives a direction to students' thoughts, and triggers their problem-solving thinking. Here the limitation is the emotions they need to express.

Procedure

- Choose a situation students are familiar with, e.g. A: You are at the disco. You are sitting at a table alone. B: You are at the disco. You see Student A at a table alone. Ask him/her to dance.
- Prepare cards with two different feelings written on them, e.g.: friendly → impatient, reserved → infatuated, etc. Have two extra cards for demonstration.

- Describe the situation to your learners and give everyone a feelings card. Tell them not to show it to anybody. Explain that as they act out the situation, they need to start talking with the first emotion on their card. They change to the second emotion when their partner uses the first one in a sentence about them, e.g. 'Oh, you are so friendly!', or 'Why are you so reserved?' Adjectives with similar meanings are OK, e.g. kind/nice or unfriendly. They finish when both of them have named both of the feelings, or when the time you set is over.
- Demonstrate how this works with a student. Then set a time limit of about three minutes.
- After the role plays, ask students if they managed to get the emotions and how they worked out how the other student was feeling.

Variations

- In lower-level classes, give students only one emotion.
- Some other creativity-triggering limitations include:
 - start your reply with the last word your partner says
 - one of the pair can only speak using questions
 - one of the pair cannot say 'Yes' or 'No'
 - the speakers have to start their utterances with a word starting with the next letter of the alphabet, e.g.
 - A: Are you Peter?
 - B: Be sure I am.
 - A: Can you dance with me?
 - B: Do me a favour. Ask someone else.

Find my picture home!

Students describe their life in a picture, while the others select the picture. Visual cues can make a situation clear at a glance while leaving it open for personal interpretations.

Procedure

- Select about five or six landscapes and put them on the walls so that everyone can see them. You'll need to have at least A3 sizes. Alternatively, make a slide-show and project them. Assign a letter to each picture.
- Ask students to mentally choose one of the landscapes and imagine that they live in that picture. Who are they? What is their life like? What do they do? Are they lonely or do they live in a family? Are they rich or poor? etc.

- Ask them to mingle and chat about their lives in the role of the person they imagined. They must not say which picture they are from. As they talk to each other, they try to match the people they talk to with the pictures and write down the person's real name with the letter sign of their picture.
- Check with the class how they matched people to pictures. Ask them if they liked their life in the picture and why/why not.

Variation

You can ask students to identify with characters or objects in a picture:

- choose a picture with quite a few objects and people in it
- project it, and ask them to choose a person or an object in the picture and speak about their life as that person or object. The others guess who/what they are
- the student who makes the correct guess first is the next person to talk.

Musical dialogues

Students make up a dialogue prompted by music.

Procedure

- Play four or five short instrumental pieces of music that suggest different moods. Ask students to listen to the pieces and imagine two people talking. They should then think about:
 - Who is talking?
 - What are they talking about?
 - What is their mood?
 - Is there a conflict?
 - Do they agree or disagree?
 - Is there a change of topic/feelings?
- Before playing an extract, announce the number you have assigned to it.
- Stop after each extract and give students a minute to jot ideas down.
- Play all the pieces again in the same order with the same numbers announced.
- After each piece of music, give students one or two minutes to compare in pairs what situations, people and dialogues they imagined.
- Play the pieces again and ask students to jot down what people in their imagined situations may be saying.
- Ask pairs to compare notes and then choose one of the imagined dialogues and get prepared to perform it.

- Play the pieces again, and then ask pairs to perform their dialogues. The class guesses which music inspired the performers.

Students talk about a third person

As with speaking in role, students will also need prompts to talk about a third person.

Tell me my story!

Procedure

- Put students into small groups and ask them to decide about a story they would like to hear.
- What kind of story should it be? A fairy tale, an adventure story, a science fiction story, a romantic story, etc.
 - Who are the main characters?
 - What is the storyline?
 - What is the title?
- Ask students to draw an illustration related to this story on a sheet of A4 paper. Ask them to write the title on it, too.
- Ask two groups to exchange drawings. Give groups about five minutes to prepare to tell the story of the other group based on the drawing. All the students in a group must take part in the story-telling.
- Put the two groups that exchanged drawings together and ask them to tell each other the stories.
- Get different groups to exchange drawings two or three more times, and repeat the second and third steps each time.
- Ask original groups to discuss which story based on their drawing they liked the most. They may decide to give their drawing to that particular group.

Variations

- Instead of drawing, groups can write key words to prompt the story they would like to hear.
- You can use music to trigger students' imagination. Play some extracts for characters, the place and the problem.

Developing writing

We often ask students to write something similar to what they have read and/or we give them a scenario and some prompts on what to write about and what language to use. A lot of what has been said about developing speaking applies to developing writing, too. Creative speaking activities can often be run as creative writing activities and/or followed up by a

writing activity. You need to make sure, however, that your students are familiar with the genre you want them to write, e.g. they are familiar with letter formats if you want them to write a letter.

Telltale objects

Students write a letter to themselves in the role of the object they identified with.

Role-cards exchange

- Pairs describe a scenario in which someone returns an object to a shop:
 - What is the object and what is wrong with it?
 - When and where was it bought?
 - What does the customer want?
- Pairs exchange scenarios and write an email/letter of complaint using the prompts.
- Pairs read each other's letters and comment on them/reply to them.

Change of feelings scenarios

Instant messaging like real or simulated online chats/text messages work best. If students cannot do the real thing, they can send a sheet of paper back and forth.

Find a scenario that works for instant messages, e.g. making an arrangement or appointment or discussing what happened at school. Engage each student in two chats at a time to keep them busy.

Find my picture home!

Students write about their life in the picture. This can be done as diary entries, blog/Facebook posts or tweets. Then they match each other's texts to the pictures.

Musical dialogues

Ask students to write up their dialogue with stage instructions and give it to another pair to perform it. They could also write a letter as one of the characters to the other character in the dialogue.

Tell me my story!

Students write the stories instead of telling them.

Developing listening and reading

When we want our students to practise their receptive skills, we want some evidence of what they understand and how they interpret what they have read or heard. We usually get this evidence through comprehension questions, like open-ended questions, true or false questions, completion, ordering, or multiple-choice exercises.

Comprehension tasks fall into two main categories:

■ **Hard listening/reading tasks**

These allow for one interpretation and one correct answer. If you misinterpret this kind of factual text in real life, you are in trouble. You miss the bus or sign a contract that goes against your interests.

■ **Soft listening/reading tasks**

These allow for many interpretations. They rely on the reader's/listener's imagination and personal judgement. How you imagine a character in a story and what your opinion is of their actions does not fall into the categories of right or wrong. This open-endedness, which establishes a very intimate, personal relationship between the reader/listener and the text, is an essential element of stories.

Our comprehension tasks need to reflect the nature of the different texts. Both text types may allow for some learner creativity, but more so with the soft ones.

Hard listening/reading tasks

Pre-reading/listening questions and predictions

Ask students to predict information they will get from a text, or get them to write questions they would like to be answered. Discuss these after the listening/reading.

Comprehension exercises from the students

Procedure

- Divide the class into two groups. Ask groups to read/listen to different texts, parts of the same text, or ask them to focus on different aspects of the same text. Ask them to make comprehension exercises for each other. It also works if they get the same text and the two groups need to make two different types of exercise. It is also possible to ask students to make a summary of the text and make some factual mistakes in it, which another student will have to find and correct.
- In different groups they swap and do each other's exercises.
- They then get the solutions for the tasks they have done and check them.
- Those who have done each other's exercises discuss questions and solutions in pairs or groups.
- Discuss any issues in plenary.

Soft listening/reading tasks

These tasks invite students to share how they imagine or interpret the text. They can also be invited to elaborate on details or influence the developments in a story.

- Ask students to draw an illustration or a cartoon strip after listening to or reading a story. Then get them to compare with each other. It is also possible to ask them to make some mistakes with the illustrations, which other students then need to find.
- Stop the recording or students' reading at a point where a description of a character, their feelings or a scene can logically fit. Ask students to imagine it and write it down or talk about it in groups or pairs.
- Stop the recording or students' reading at a point where there is a decisive moment in the story. (If they are reading, make sure you ask them before they start reading to cover the part of the text you don't want them to read.) Get them to imagine what happens next and share it through talking, mime, drama or drawing. Then they compare these with what really happens. If you tell them the story orally, you can stop at any point and ask them to decide how the story goes on and continue the story the way students suggest. If there is more than one suggestion, take a vote or you can make the rule that you always take the first suggestion you get.
- Give the descriptions of the main characters in a story to different groups of students. Ask them to make a drawing of their character. Then groups swap drawings and describe the character based on the drawing. Groups return the drawings with the descriptions they wrote on them. Groups compare the description the other group made with the original description, and they give each other feedback.
- Ask students to choose pieces of music to represent different characters in a story. Ask them to play the pieces and explain their choices.
- Ask students to sit facing each other as you play a dialogue/story with several different emotions/events. Get them to show each other through gestures and facial expressions how people in the story feel. Then discuss.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen a number of more creative alternatives to typical, everyday classroom exercises and procedures. They included activities in which students create exercises and games for each other that they normally get ready-made in books or from their teachers. With others, students have a chance to tap into their own experience and imagination, reflect on their own life, act in roles, animate objects or use their artistic, dramatic and musical skills. The beauty of engaging our learners in a creative process instead of keeping them in a more passive and receptive role is that this decision automatically takes care of a lot of other considerations such as:

- How is the topic/text going to be relevant and motivating?
- How am I going to keep my learners busy?
- How are the learners going to be able to rely on their other skills and knowledge?
- How are they going to use the language instrumentally, i.e. to achieve an aim?
- How are the learners going to derive pleasure from what they have done and achieved?

Through their creativity and the freedom creative thinking gives to them, students get involved more deeply and in more ways than with activities that do not call for the use of their creativity. The result of their work is more characteristic of them as individuals and expresses more who they are and where they are at the moment. Taken together, this tends to lead to a richer, more memorable, more enjoyable and more motivational learning experience.

References

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Judit Fehér is a freelance teacher, teacher trainer and materials writer. Her students' age has ranged from five-day-old to 60+, and their levels from total beginner to advanced. As a trainer, Judit works for Pilgrims and the British Council, running courses and workshops mainly in Hungary and the UK. Most of the teaching materials she has written target secondary students. These include: *Language Activities for Teenagers* (CUP) (contributor); *Your Exam Success* and the *Bloggers* series (NTK), which are courses developed for Hungary; and *Creative Communication*, which is a collection of skills-based, task-based modular online materials. She is a co-author of *Creative Resources* with Bonnie Tsai (IAL, Atlanta).

2

A framework for learning creativity

Tessa Woodward

Introduction

When we think of creative individuals, we have a tendency perhaps to call to mind solitary, eminent men in the Western high arts and sciences, names of a well-known elite like Leonardo da Vinci, Beethoven and Vincent van Gogh. We call these and others like them ‘geniuses’ and, whether they are within the field of music, painting, mathematics or science, we imagine they were quite simply born that way, with clever minds and destined for amazing accomplishments. The rest must have come easy to them, we may think.

This way of thinking has a number of disadvantages. It encourages us to concentrate on what happens in the *mind* of an individual person. It ignores the heart and emotions, the body, the environment, and any creative collaboration between people. It ignores too the work of those in the more popular arts, people such as Ella Fitzgerald with her fabulous vocal improvisation skills. And it ignores the everyday creativity we see in our children, our students, our friends and family, and ourselves. Worse yet, it lets us off the hook. After all, if we are not ourselves lone, creative men in the high arts, we must therefore not be creative geniuses. So that’s it. We don’t have to do anything. We don’t even have to try. In fact we may be afraid to try.

My own view is different. I believe that we can redefine what it means to be creative. We can give ourselves permission to learn, sometimes with others, to be even more creative in our everyday lives than we are already. This way, we start a path we can walk along. In this chapter then, I will suggest ways that we language teachers can become more creative in our own work with learners.

Brief background questions

To break away from the unfortunate thought pattern mentioned above, we need to consider some basic questions.

First, what does it mean to create?

To define a word we can go to outside or inside sources. Here is a definition of creativity from ‘outside’, spliced together from several dictionaries:

‘Creativity is the bringing into existence, causing, developing of original ideas. It can involve a change in the condition of something, the use of something in a new way, or a novel combination of the known that produces interesting and useful results.’

And if we ask fellow language teachers what they would regard as a creative lesson, they might, from ‘inside’ their own experience, say...

‘A creative lesson is one that involves one or more of the following:

- spontaneity
- music
- colour
- variety
- fun
- humour
- movement
- personal meaning
- unpredictability
- a balance between challenge and security, relaxation and tension.’

You will want to add ingredients of your own to the list.

And if any of us is asked, a little more concretely, what activities in our everyday lives make us feel creative, we can all come up with an extremely wide variety, such as ‘cleaning out cupboards’, ‘cooking dinner’, ‘singing a new harmony to an old song on the radio’ or ‘making a new pump for the central heating boiler’! These concrete examples usually fall within the four modes of: doing, making, adapting and creating (Sanders, 2005).

All this gives us a refreshing and optimistic view of what we are aiming at.

By the way, does it feel good to create?

If asked, we might say without too much thought that the act of creating feels wonderful, feels easy, free as a breeze. However, when John Tusa, a BBC radio and television journalist, interviewed over 50 established actors, painters, sculptors, musicians, architects, playwrights, film makers and choreographers about how they felt when working creatively, some said they felt worried, others that they couldn’t sleep, or felt they were building something painstakingly slowly, pebble by pebble. Others said they felt lonely, that it felt very, very risky. (The Tusa interviews can be found at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00nb1n3>)

Still, the product of creativity is always welcomed, isn’t it?

Not really! We may as well assume that all babies are welcomed, when we know that some are not, being unexpected, unwanted, or coming too early or too late. The world too has always been full of creative people, who were, at least initially, ostracised or persecuted for their ideas.

The German physicist, Röntgen, for example, who first produced and detected in the lab the rays now known as X-rays, freaked his wife out when he showed her an X-ray of her hand! And his whole endeavour was initially declared by the scientific community to be an elaborate hoax.

Ignaz Semmelweis was a Hungarian physician who suggested the outrageous practice of doctors washing their hands before delivering babies, so as to avoid the spread of purple fever. The reaction of the medical community to his idea was so hostile that he had a nervous breakdown and died in an insane asylum.

So there are many different possible reactions to a new idea. I once identified some twenty different kinds of reactions. These range from changing the subject of conversation, to immediately embracing or taking against an idea, to denial that the new idea is even possible, to dismissing the idea for not being new at all (Woodward, 2002).

So we need not expect to feel great while we create nor, necessarily, to be lauded by our colleagues for our creations!

How can we and our students become more creative?

But let’s suppose that we are still keen to become more creative and to help our students become creative too, believing that, though it may be hard work, it will bring interesting and useful results. How can we go about it? There follow some practical principles widely agreed upon by many of those interested in creativity.

Practical principles

Wake up!

At the start of class we all need to come together, settle and become mentally alert before much that is useful can happen. We can speed up this readying process by doing unusual things such as:

- Listening to a recording of birdsong, doing some gentle physical exercises, singing together or enjoying the scent of pine oil.
- Asking students to count from one to eight and to clap as they say each number out loud. Next, they clap eight times again but miss out actually saying the number three. Once they can do that, challenge them to miss out saying two numbers (three and five). Then three numbers (two and six and eight) while still clapping the eight times. It takes concentration!

- Giving the students a puzzle that is easily solvable by just doing a little work. An example is 'Think of the English alphabet written in capital letters. How many letters have curved lines in them?' Students are allowed to use pencil and paper to solve this puzzle. It just gets them thinking (and visualising).

Be prolific!

Once we are all awake, we need to produce a large number of ideas, to go for quantity and not to worry at first about judging the ideas for quality. This enables us to note down even the most obvious ideas and also to include ideas that may at first seem weak or weird but which can later be improved or used to add a new angle. Anecdote reports that Einstein, the physicist and philosopher, was once asked: 'What's the difference between you and a normal person?' He said in reply, 'If you ask a normal person to find a needle in a haystack, the person would stop when they found the needle. I, on the other hand, would tear the haystack apart looking for all the possible needles!'

We don't know how Einstein felt about the implication that he was not normal but he certainly shared an immense productivity with all kinds of creative people!

So, the principle is to go for abundance ourselves and to encourage our students to produce a full quota of ideas. Some ideas follow on how to do this.

- Invite students to consider an everyday object such as a sock and to dream up 20 things they could use it for, apart from protecting a foot.
- Ask students to write ten true sentences about what they did at the weekend. When they complain about the number, put it up to 15.
 - 'What? Fifteen!'
 - 'Oh, okay then. Twenty!'

When students realise that every time they complain the number goes up, they usually stop complaining!

- Invite students to choose a colour. Give them five minutes to check their environment and to list as many things they can see (and think of) that have that colour. Then share the lists.
- Can students think of ten words beginning with the letter B? Eight hobbies beginning with P? Twelve things that make them happy?

Naturally, when going for greater productivity like this, you and the students will need to defer judgement until later and refrain from too much self- and other correction. Once the pool of contributions is in, then you can start to sort them out and decide which ones you want to keep.

Make unusual connections and combinations

A classic creativity principle is the idea of conceptually blending two or more apparently unrelated ideas or things. Juxtaposition of the normally separated helps to jolt us out of our thinking ruts. Or, to switch metaphors, it causes mental sparks! So, in class, you might:

- Invite students to discuss how a text that they have got to know quite well can be compared and contrasted to an apparently unrelated picture you have chosen to show them. Ask students to come up with as many ways as they can in which the text and the picture are alike. Although at first glance the text and the picture will seem unrelated, the mind, being what it is, will search for some kind of connection, be it in terms of colour, shape, number, emotion, topic or meaning. (See Woodward 2011: 61).

- Ask students to come up with the similarities and differences between themselves and something they are interested in, such as a tiger, a dinosaur, a princess, a skateboard or a tablet computer. The comparisons can be expressed in the form of a Venn diagram as below:



(See Woodward, 2011: 89–90)

- Remind students of the main ingredients of any story, e.g. place, time, characters, important objects, theme, actions. Write these up on the board. Under each of these main headings, brainstorm and write up different possible variations. For example, under 'Place' students could offer: *the moon, my dad's garage, Beijing, or an armpit*. Under 'Time' you might get: *yesterday, in the ice age, in 3015*, etc.
- Each group of students then selects one possibility from beneath each main heading and sets to work to create a story combining, for example, a teenage girl, with a cat, in the Ice Age, carrying out a robbery, in her dad's garage.

Here's another simple generative framework for class. It's called an 'alteration dictation'. Dictate a simple sentence, true about yourself, to your students. An example might be, 'I like apples.' Students write this sentence down. Next, underneath that sentence, they have to rewrite it so that it is true of *them* not you. Thus they might write 'I like apples too', or 'I only like sweet apples', or 'I prefer bananas' and so on. Share the results.

Use simple generative frameworks

Some frameworks, though very simple and easy to use, are incredibly productive. Take the maxim 'Find out what you usually do and then do something different!' If you followed it, you could go to work via a different route and a different form of transport every day, wearing unusual colours and with your watch on upside down and your jumper back to front. And that is just for starters!

- The whole idea of novel combinations is itself a simple generative framework. So, to put it into practice, you can give students two lists of everyday objects from home, school, the street and so on. Something like these:

Fridge	Picture
Computer	Hammock
Bedroom	Music
Window	Bar of chocolate
Ticket	Pillow
Garden	A cup of coffee
Chair	A T-shirt
Sun cream	A camera
Pencil	A bottle of perfume
Dictionary	A doormat

Students choose one object from the list on the left and one from the list on the right and combine them in any order. So, a student might come up with a 'Computer T-shirt'. If they wish, they can change it to 'A computerised T-shirt'. Next, they think what this new invention of theirs might look like and be able to do. So a wearer might be able to change the colour of a computerised T-shirt depending on what else they were wearing that day. Or they could type different slogans onto the front and back of the T-shirt in different font styles, colours and sizes, or display a street view to a companion so they know where they are, and so on. In pairs, each student explains their new invention to a partner who has to help them to extend and refine the idea with them in order to make it even better. They can even draw the invention and put it in a class sales catalogue if you like! (See Woodward 2011: 146–7).

Don't forget the heart, and the body, and the environment

We have started off by looking at principles that encourage mental creativity. It is true, however, that creativity is also profoundly affected by emotion. If we and our students feel comfortable, and secure, and are having an enjoyable time, more and broader ideas will tend to flow, whether we are waking up, being prolific, making unusual connections or using simple generative frameworks.

A positive state of mind and the permission and time to be creative will encourage us to engage in the work. It helps if we can move around and express ourselves physically too, and it helps if our work environment is conducive to our doing, making, adapting and creating. So here are a few ideas designed to work on these important areas.

- To improve the environment, can you adjust the temperature, lighting and air flow in your class room so it is more pleasant? Use coloured paper sometimes? Bring in plants, posters, calming or inspiring colours, smells and sounds, and physical objects? Can you use the walls for display? If not, can you import flip charts or cork boards? Can you get a view from a window to somewhere or something natural?
- To break down feelings of isolation and competition among students, ask students to team up with a partner and explore three things they have in common with each other and three things that are different. These six things must not be visible! So, for example, noting your partner's hair colour and whether they wear glasses or not doesn't count! Once the interviews are under way, students write sentences about their pair using starter phrases such as, 'Both of us...', 'Neither of us...', 'One of us... but the other...' (See Woodward, 2011: 178).
- Give students a good reason to get up from their desks and move around by asking them, for example, to give out handouts, clean the board, open a window or do total physical response exercises to learn vocabulary, such as 'Raise your left arm', 'Turn around once', 'Tickle your chin', and so on.

Collaborate and share

At the start, I suggested that our traditional view of a creative person as a lone genius ignores the role of the conversation and collaboration that undoubtedly takes place between them and their colleagues. Historians have discovered, for example, that 13 people collaborated with Michelangelo on the Sistine Chapel and that 200 people assisted him with the Laurentian Library in Florence. So there goes our myth of the lone genius!

When people come together, the number of associations triggered multiplies. So, collective creativity often gives us more than the sum of our individual offerings.

So what tips are there for this aspect of creativity?

- Foster a culture of participation in your classes. Allow yourself and students to work together, take risks, create, fail and learn from this. So in a board game where students try to come up with names of capital cities starting with the letter 'A', you can reward the first person to come up with, say, 'Amsterdam' as long as they can spell it, thus rewarding the usual speed and accuracy. But you can also add incentives for those who come up with more than one example (say, 'Accra' and 'Athens'), so rewarding the prolific. You can also reward the student who comes up with a city that nobody else thinks of (say 'Asmara') and encourage the student who comes up with other unusual cities, even if they are not capitals or well spelled. You can encourage the whole class to work together to gain a bigger and bigger total together as well as to learn more about what makes a city a capital, which countries the cities are in, and where these countries are.
- Encourage good conversations by discussing the ground rules for a good conversation with students. They might come up with ideas such as: say what you think honestly and also why you think it. Accept that the other person has different views. Refrain from arguing or trying to change their mind even if they are very different from you. Don't interrupt; listen carefully; extend the ideas of others, etc.
- You can also discuss the social conditions necessary for good collaboration, e.g. access to shared content, some privacy and quiet reflection, mess-making, support for a range of moods such as playful, serious, stimulating, formal and informal.
- Try different arrangements of people and space depending on what you are doing. So, for example, brainstorming can be done as a whole class but also in groups or teams. The solving of problems can be done by having different problems at different tables and asking groups of students to work on one problem at one table for a while before moving to a new table and a new problem. Instead of moving groups of students about, especially if your room is cramped, the student groups can stay in the same places but the large pieces of paper used to record their ideas, in a

discussion for example, can be moved around so that groups can see and comment on what other groups have produced. This last idea is sometimes known as a 'pass the paper' or 'carousel' activity.

Make our thinking physical and visible

This is our last principle, but it is an especially important one if your class has been working collaboratively on any of the other principles above. This is because, using these principles, you are likely to end up with lots of ideas. You therefore need recording devices to capture, organise and capitalise on all the ideas that come up. It is demotivating for anybody to see ideas emerge, especially their own, and then see them shot down or ignored.

As well as your normal note-taking methods, consider the use of Venn diagrams, scales, steps, fishbone diagrams, lists, mind maps, collages, sticky or magnetic notes that can be moved around and clustered, posters displayed on walls, clay models, photos, physical tableaux, Lego blocks, wikis and columns in good old-fashioned notebooks.

These flexible and adaptable means enable you and the group to make your thinking visible and to consider what you have produced together. You can then collaborate further to prioritise, refine or extend ideas.

The three-phase creativity cycle

These seven principles will certainly help us and our students to feel and be more creative, both alone and together. Creativity takes time, however, so finally I would like to offer the well-known idea of a three-phase creativity cycle.

- The first phase is **practice**. We can practise being creative by trying out the ideas above. Practice means doing it!
- The second phase is **reflect**. Reflection means thinking about what we have done. Here we need:
 - to allow wait-time after questions and after answers, allow thinking time and silent time
 - time to review, to question, take notes and talk things over so that we can decide on selection, priorities, classifications, refinements and applications of the ideas we have all come up with.
- The final phase is **relax**. Once we have practised, then reflected, we need to relax or 'switch off' by, for example, taking a break or doing something different, or simply stopping trying so hard.

Woodward, T (2011) *Thinking in the EFL Class* (pp 149–189, on creative thinking). Innsbruck, Austria: Helbling Languages.

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