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Creativity in language teaching

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ABSTRACT

One quality among the many that characterize effective teachers is the ability to bring a creative disposition to teaching. In second language teaching, creativity has also been linked to levels of attainment in language learning. Many of the language tasks favored by contemporary language teaching methods are believed to release creativity in learners – particularly those involving student-centred, interaction-based, and open-ended elements. Drawing on teacher narratives and conversations with teachers, the notion of creativity in language teaching is explored from three different perspectives: 1. *the qualities creative teachers possess*. 2. *how teachers apply creativity in their teaching*. 3. *how creativity can be supported in the school*. Examples illustrate how creative teachers' conceptualize their approaches to teaching.

Keywords: creativity; language teaching; teacher cognition; teacher expertise; teacher development; teacher training; teacher narratives

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Introduction

One of the consequences of the spread of English as an international language is a growing demand at all levels in both the public and private education sectors for good English language teachers. School owners and program directors want teachers who are dedicated, well-qualified, have a good command of English, who work well with their colleagues, who can engage and motivate their students and who are committed to helping their learners succeed. But above all they want individuals who are good teachers. The notion of what it means to be a good teacher is a complex one, since good teaching draws on many different qualities that teachers bring to their classes – reflecting the knowledge, skills and understanding they have built up from their professional education and from their experience of teaching. In this paper, I want to explore one quality among the many that characterize effective teachers – the ability to bring a creative disposition to teaching.

In recent years, research and theorizing on the nature and impact of creativity has been a focus in almost every discipline and domain, from those where it has traditionally been central such as fashion design and literature, to areas where it is perhaps less familiar such as business or management. Talk about creativity is everywhere today, driven by the need for companies and organizations to be more competitive and by the movement towards learner-centred rather than test-driven teaching in schools. Ministries of education in different parts of the world have encouraged schools to focus more on creativity in the curriculum across all subject areas – something that is believed to have widespread consequences. For example a recent report in the UK concluded that Britain's economic prosperity and social cohesion depended on developing a national strategy for creative and cultural education. At the school level, creativity is said to provide a powerful way of engaging learners with their learning. Creative teaching is said to increase levels of motivation and self-esteem on the part of learners and to prepare them with the flexible skills they need for the future. Developing the capacity to be creative is believed to have the potential to enrich lives and help contribute to a better society. However, not all students have the opportunity to experience creative teaching. A recent study at Vanderbilt University in the US found that arts majors developed more creative problem-solving skills than almost any other area of study: their courses helped them develop the skills of risk-taking, dealing with ambiguities, discovering patterns, and the use of analogy and metaphor. 80% of arts students said that expressing creativity was part of their courses, however only 3% of biology majors and about 13 % of engineers and business reported a focus on creativity in their coursework.

In education, creativity is important because it can improve academic attainment. Fisher (2004, p. 11) reports:

Research shows that when students are assessed in ways that recognize and value their creative abilities, their academic performance improves. Creative activity can rekindle the interest of students who have been turned off by school, and teachers who may be turned off by teaching in a culture of control and compliance.

In language teaching, Maley's work has emphasized a focus on creativity through the use of texts drawn from a variety of different literary and non-literary sources that can be used to elicit creative thinking and foster the ability to make creative connections (Maley, 1997). Creativity has also been linked to levels of attainment in second language learning. Many of the language tasks favoured by contemporary language teaching methods are believed to release creativity in learners – particularly those involving student-centred, interaction-based, and open-ended elements, and are therefore in principle ideally suited to fostering creative thinking and behaviour on the part of learners (Burton, 2010). Creative intelligence seems to be a factor that can facilitate language learning because it helps learners cope with novel and unpredictable experiences. Communicative teaching methods have a role to play here since they emphasize functional and situational language use and employ activities

such as role-play and simulations that require students to use their imaginations and think creatively. So what does creativity look like in a language classroom?

Here is an actual example of a creative teacher at work. She was confronted with the following situation:

A teacher has just called in sick. You are going to teach her 50-minute spoken English class, lower-intermediate level, in five minutes. Your only teaching aid is an empty glass.

The teacher thought about it for less than a minute and then elaborated her idea for the lesson.

1. *I would start by showing the glass and asking students to form groups and brainstorm for five minutes, to come up with the names of as many different kinds of containers as possible. They would then group them, according to their functions. For example, things that contain food, things that are used to carry things, things that are used to store things in and so on. I would model how they should do this and suggest the kind of language they could use. (10 minutes).*
2. *Students would present their findings to the class to see who had come up with the longest list. (10 minutes).*
3. *For a change of pace, and to practise functional language, I would do some dialogue work, practising asking to borrow a container from a neighbour. First, I would model the kind of exchange I want them to practise. Then students would plan their dialogue following this outline:*
 - a) *Apologize for bothering your neighbour.*
 - b) *Explain what you want and why you need it.*
 - c) *Your neighbour offers to lend you what you want.*
 - d) *Thank your neighbour and promise to return it on the weekend.*

Students would then perform their dialogues.

But how do teachers arrive at creative solutions to problems like this and what exactly does creativity consist of? There are many different ways of defining creativity depending on whether we see it “as a property of *people* (who we are), *processes* (what we do) or *products* (what we make)” (Fisher 2004, p. 8). Hence, creativity is usually described as having a number of different dimensions:

- the ability to solve problems in original and valuable ways that are relevant to goals,
- seeing new meanings and relationships in things and making connections,
- having original and imaginative thoughts and ideas about something,
- using the imagination and past experience to create new learning possibilities.

When creativity is viewed as a *product*, the focus might be on a particular lesson, a task or activity in a book, or a piece of student writing. What are the specific features of the lesson that enables us to say that it is creative? When viewed as a *process*, the focus is on the thinking processes and decisions that a person makes use of in producing something that we would describe as creative (Jones, 2012). It is these two dimensions to creativity that I want to illustrate in here by focusing on both the special attributes and qualities of a group of creative teachers of English – this is the product dimension if you like – and then to consider how these attributes lead to particular classroom processes in language teaching. I will also consider how schools can foster a culture of creativity and the benefits it can bring for the school as well as for teachers and students. But first let me say something about my data sources.

My most recent interest in creativity in teaching was prompted by reading a report of a UK research project that was carried out in Kent by a team from Canterbury Christ Church University (Cremin, Barnes & Scoffham, 2009). This involved an initial survey of 20 schools followed by a more detailed study undertaken in four of the schools – two primary and two secondary – in which the quality of creative teaching was acknowledged to be outstanding. The teachers in these schools were not TESOL teachers but the research identified three interrelated dimensions of creative teaching that are both product and process related and which also emphasized the school context as a crucial factor in facilitating creative teaching. The findings in the Kent study highlighted three factors:

- a) the personal qualities of the teacher,
- b) the pedagogy the teacher adopts; and
- c) the ethos of the class and school.

I decided to look further into these dimensions of creative teaching in relation to the thinking and practices of teachers of English, by first asking a group of English teachers to write about their philosophies of teaching. I then selected from the teacher's stories those that appeared to reflect a creative disposition. Following this, I conducted follow-up interviews – both spoken and written – to probe further into the teachers' thinking and to find examples from their classroom practice that illustrated creative approaches to teaching. In order to summarize the results of these conversations and interviews and following on from the Kent research, I will discuss three different dimensions of creative teaching:

1. ***The qualities creative teachers possess.*** First, we will explore some of the personal qualities and attributes that creative teachers possess.
2. ***How teachers apply creativity in their teaching.*** Next, we will look at some of the teaching strategies employed by creative teachers.
3. ***How creativity can be supported in the school.*** Lastly, we will look at the school context and how the situation in which the teacher works either encourages or inhibits creative teaching.

THE QUALITIES CREATIVE TEACHERS POSSESS

We can probably all recall teachers we know who were very creative in their approach to teaching. Of course, we have all encountered teachers who make use of carefully developed lesson plans, who keep their lessons focussed on accurate performance of tasks, who are strict about getting

homework in on time and returning it with detailed corrections and suggestions. Hopefully, however, we also have powerful and fond memories of a teacher who sparked our imagination, who inspired us by their individual and personal teaching style, who motivated us to want to continue learning and perhaps to eventually decide to become an English teacher. What makes teachers like this different?

Creative people are a little different from others because they draw on different kinds of knowledge and ability from less creative people and make use of different thinking processes. Creativity depends upon the ability to analyse and evaluate situations and to identify novel ways of responding to them. This in turn depends upon a number of different abilities and levels of thinking. Let me now try to describe eight aspects of teacher ability and cognition that characterize some of the qualities of creative teachers.

Creative teachers are knowledgeable

Creative teachers have a solid knowledge base. They know their subject – English, teaching English, and learning English - and they draw on their subject matter knowledge in building creative lessons. A knowledge base is important because without knowledge, imagination cannot be productive. Creativity does not mean making unfocussed and unprincipled actions. It does not mean making it up as you go.

Let me first give an example of creativity *without* a solid knowledge base -which I characterize as mis-placed creativity. I once worked with a native-speaker teacher who had no formal education in TESOL but had taught for 8 years in an EFL context by virtue of the fact that he was a native speaker. He had developed a technique he called ‘sponting’, which he used as a feature of every class he taught. For example he might take a word to begin a lesson: ‘English’. He would ask students to come up with words that started with E-N-G-L-I-S-H. Then he would take the ending ‘ish’ and ask for nationalities that ended in ‘ish’. Suddenly he was comparing ‘Finnish’ – the nationality, with ‘to finish’. Next he was asking students if they knew what a finishing school was. And so it went on. When I asked him to explain the theoretical rationale for this activity and what it was supposed to achieve he could not come up with a convincing response.

This is what I mean by creativity not linked to a solid knowledge base. It leads to activities that have no legitimate goal or purpose. Compare that approach to creativity with this teacher’s account of a lesson:

Drawing on knowledge of texts

When I teach I may not have a detailed lesson plan but I keep my goals firmly in mind and I know what I am trying to teach, whether it is a reading lesson, a speaking lesson and so on. And if I decide to do something that I hadn’t planned it’s because I suddenly thought of a more interesting and engaging way of practicing something. For example the other day we were studying narratives and were looking at a text in the book when it occurred to me that it would be fun if students created a jigsaw narrative in groups. Each group would prepare the opening section of a narrative, and then pass them around so that each group added the next section to the story. It turned out to be a good way of reinforcing what we had been studying, about the features of narrative texts - you know about setting, characters, events, problem, and resolution.

C., English teacher, Mexico

In the next example, the teacher makes use of sociolinguistic knowledge and refers to differences in the use of formal and casual speech:

Making use of sociolinguistic knowledge

One of the things that my students seem to find interesting and even amusing is when I present a different point of view from an idea presented in one of the texts we are using. I guess this is just a matter of confidence but I feel it is good for learners to see that ideas in print can be challenged. The most obvious example of this is when texts we are reading have been written by someone writing in a different cultural context. For instance, the other day we were reading a text, written in the USA, about taking part in a job interview. The text said very clearly that the interviewee should call any male interviewers "Sir" and any females "Ma'am". So I explained that in the country I come from, that would be completely inappropriate because those terms of address are not familiar. This opened up a very interesting discussion about terms of address, formality and respect. My intention was to highlight for the learners that such matters are defined very differently in different cultural contexts and it is important to be sensitive to the context. The same issues of formality and informality occur in writing of course, so I was able to refer to this conversation later when we started working on letter writing.

S., University teacher, UAE

And here a teacher refers to a pedagogical principle:

Drawing on a pedagogical principle

One of my favourite activities for changing things up a little in the Writing class is to use the idea of Dictogloss that Ruth Wajnryb came up with. This involves reading a short text very quickly (too fast for the learners to write it down) to the class several times and then asking them, in groups, to reconstruct the text, focusing on the meaning, and expressing it any way they choose. Once all the groups are finished, I ask one representative of each to write their text on the board simultaneously (after dividing the board into 4-5 sections). The element of competition works well here as groups try to make their version closest to the original but focus also on making sure that their text communicates effectively. This provides a very realistic reason for focusing on accuracy as we work through each of the texts one by one, commenting on its relationship to the message of the original text. This activity is a real crowd pleaser but is also pedagogically very sound.

S., University teacher, UAE

So having a solid knowledge base means that the teacher has a rationale and purpose for the creative activities he or she uses. They have not been chosen merely for their novelty value but because they reflect the teachers' knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning.

Creative teaching requires confidence

This attribute partly follows on from the preceding one, since knowledge of subject matter can provide a sense of confidence that enables the teacher to be original and creative. Confidence is also a product of experience of course. One feature of confidence is that it gives teachers a sense that they are in control of their classroom and that it is the teacher – not the book or the curriculum – that can make a difference. Creative teachers see their input to the lesson as being decisive and so they have a sense of personal responsibility for how well learners learn.

Creating a personal learning space

I want my class to be MY teaching leaning space. I personalize it with pictures, photos and other things that the students and I choose. I want them to feel that when they come into my classroom they are going to experience a lesson that has been personally created for them by me.

J., English teacher, Ecuador

Following one's intuitions

I have been teaching for nearly ten years and now I am much more confident in the classroom than I was when I first started teaching. At first I used to worry about what my students thought about me – Did I know my subject?, Did I know how to introduce the material?, Was I in control of the class? and so on. Now that I am much more confident as a teacher I am more willing to follow my intuitions, to try out new approaches and strategies, to take risks and experiment. It makes teaching more enjoyable for me.

M., English teacher, Peru

Creative teachers are committed to helping their learners succeed

Conversations with creative teachers confirm that they are very committed to their learner's success. The fact that they are creative means they are constantly adjusting their teaching in order to better facilitate learning. Otherwise, they would just stick to the book or their lesson plan. They want their learners to succeed and they try to find out as much as they can about their learners to enable them to best cater to their needs. They also seek to develop their learners' self-confidence.

Developing self-confidence in learners

The more I know about my learners, the better I can help them learn. Self-assurance can inspire second language learners to pass through the door of the world of English especially those who do not believe in themselves. Why is it important for a student to believe in one's self? I have to deal with this question when working with students. Learners who boost self-confidence, boost success in acquiring the knowledge of a foreign language. In other words, they awake their credence in learning English.

R., English teacher, Mexico

One teacher emphasized the need to recognizing individual differences among learners:

Focusing on learners as individuals

I believe that one of the most important things I can do for my learners is to increase their confidence in their ability to learn successfully. It never ceases to amaze me how different the learners in a single class can be. I believe it is my job to find out what the particular strengths and weaknesses of each learner are and to work with those, usually outside of class time. One of the ways I do this is by personalizing the feedback I give on my learners' writing. This is where I can give advice about the areas that a particular learner needs to work on or where I can congratulate them

on something they have done very well. In this way, I treat my written feedback with them as part of an ongoing conversation. In a way, it allows me to extend the time I can spend with each learner beyond the hours we spend together in the classroom and the times where they drop into my office with a question or just to chat.

S., University English teacher, UAE

And here a teacher stresses his interest in what happens to her learners after they leave the program:

Following learners' progress

One really nice thing that happens a lot when you are a writing teacher is that you often get contacted by learners whom you have taught in the past and asked to comment on the texts they write when they are applying for scholarships or jobs. This is a very exciting experience for me because it gives me an idea of what has happened to my learners since I worked with them and allows me to maintain a relationship with them beyond their classroom days.

M., English teacher, Peru

Creative teachers are non-conformists

Conformity is the enemy of creativity. It reduces the likelihood of creating fresh points of view and new insights. Bruner (1962) defined creativity as 'an act that produces *effective surprise*'. Fisher (2004, p. 9) comments:

It is originality that provides effective surprise. To do the same things in the same way is not to be creative, to do things differently adds variation to mere habit, but when we do or think things we have not done before, and they are effective, we are being original and fully creative.

The creative teacher does not simply present lessons from the book. He or she looks for original ways of creating lessons and using the textbook and teaching materials and seeks to create lessons that reflect his or her individual teaching style. This is another way of saying that being creative means seeking to adapt and modify lessons to better match the learners' needs. For this reason, creative teachers are generally very different from each other. Learning to be a creative teacher does not mean modelling or copying the practices of other creative teachers, but rather it means understanding the principles that underlie creative teaching. Individual teachers will realize these principles in different ways. We see this approach reflected in principles articulated by creative teachers:

Making lessons unique experiences

I try to think of every lesson I teach as a unique experience. I try not to repeat myself. I think the students in my school recognize that I teach differently from some of the other teachers in the school. It doesn't mean that I am better than them but I want my lessons to reflect my way of teaching.

M., English teacher, Peru

Creating effective surprises

I like my students to feel that when they come to my class they will always experience something a little different and unexpected. Not novelty for its own sake but a different way of doing things. For example, in addition to teaching how to write I make a point of teaching students how not to write. I try to find the worst possible examples and ask students to mark these as if they were the teacher. I then reveal to them who the texts were written by. Students love finding out that some of the texts came from Ministry of Education documents and websites! I try to add new techniques to my repertoire every year.

L., English teacher, Mexico

Avoiding repetition

I have been using the same textbook for over five years, along with lots of other teachers in my school. Each time I teach from it I try to do different things with it, to use it ways that are a little but different from the ways my colleagues use it. They tend to stick to the book a lot of the time. I find it much more interesting to try to find different ways of teaching it, sometimes reversing the order of exercises in a unit, having students rewrite some of the reading texts, sometimes having the students teach the book themselves, taking turns. It becomes more interesting for me as well as more fun for the learners too. I try to challenge myself by not repeating things too many times.

R., English teacher, Mexico

Creative teachers are familiar with a wide range of strategies and techniques

Creativity in teaching means having a wide repertoire of routines and strategies which teachers can call upon, as well as being ready to depart from established procedures and to use one's own solutions. In general, novice teachers are much less likely to be creative than experienced teachers simply because they are familiar with fewer strategies and techniques. The danger is that once a teacher becomes comfortable in using a core set of techniques and strategies these become fixed.

Varying tasks and activities

I have a repertoire of at least 20 different ways of dealing with a writing task depending on which stage of the process we are working on. Sometimes we work with brainstorming techniques like listing, cubing or mind mapping. These can be done orally or in writing. Sometimes it's more productive when learners work in pairs. Sometimes we do continuous writing on topics they generate, just to focus on fluency. Other times we work with the organization of texts, identifying the best sequence in which to present elements of the text and allocating different learners to generate the ideas and language for different parts. This way we come up with a collaborative text. I also use reformulation in class a lot – this involves presenting two versions of a completed text: the learner's original text and then a version of it that I have reworked to make it communicate more effectively. The positive thing about reformulation is that it involves no 'correction' of the learner's text but invites students to identify the changes that have been made and to discuss why they have been made. In this way it is developing their critical skills and helping them find ways of evaluating and improving their own texts. The key is to keep the activities fresh and to encourage learners to contribute the content. With writing, the sky is the limit as far as content is concerned; they are only limited by their imagination.

S., University teacher, UAE

Creative teachers are risk-takers

The creative teacher is willing to experiment, to innovate, and to take risks. Risk-taking reflects the flexible mindset of creative teachers as well as their self-confidence. They are willing to try things out, even if at times they may not work quite the way they are intended.

Learning from mistakes

Recently I thought I would try an activity that focussed on noticing. I prepared some role-play activities and had my low-intermediate-level students practice them. For a follow up I asked my advanced level students to try the same role plays and I recorded their efforts, planning to use them as a 'noticing' activity for my lower-level students. I wanted my students to listen to the more advanced level students doing the role plays and to 'notice' some of the more complex language they used. Unfortunately my students did not find the noticing activity interesting, so I am rethinking how I might revisit this kind of activity to make it more engaging.

E., English teacher, Mexico

So the teacher is willing to rethink or revise, or if necessary abandon her original plan and try something else. But this is seen as a learning moment and not an indication of failure.

Pausing to rethink

Last year I got students to keep a writing portfolio. The idea was to get them to reflect on their progress and motivate them by getting them to see evidence of their work. They hated it! They just thought it was more work and didn't help them with their exams. I will really need to rethink this one.

E., English teacher, Mexico

Trying something new

Recently in my writing class I asked learners to find any website or a blog that interested them and submit a question to that blog and see if they got an answer. I was a bit nervous that learners might choose unsuitable sites but thought I'd give it a go anyway. As it happened only a few students completed the assignment but one of them who did reported on a Tandem Language Learning website she had found that welcomed learners to join for free. She had been paired up with an Australian girl who was learning Spanish and they had already exchanged a number of emails and were planning to have a Skype meeting. Her report was completely unexpected but ended up motivating a number of other students to visit the same site and find their own partners. Whereas at first I thought the activity had been unsuccessful because not everyone did it, in fact this one student's enthusiasm ended up influencing several others to follow her lead, which eventually provided lots of additional written communication practice in English.

S., University teacher, UAE

Creative teachers seek to achieve learner-centred lessons

A trait that is reflected in several of the comments above is that of learner-centredness. This is seen in teachers who listen to their learners and who seek opportunities for learners to take responsibility and control of their learning. An important feature of learner-centred lessons is the extent to which the lesson connects with the learners' life experiences. How can we link the content of a lesson more closely to our students' lives? Here is one teacher's response to this question:

Personalising lesson content

As far as I can I try to involve my students in developing the content of lessons. For example if I am teaching students to write narratives, while the textbook provides examples of what narratives are and what their features are, as soon as possible I like to shift the lesson focus to sharing personal stories. When students share accounts of their childhoods and write about important events or experiences in their lives they become much more involved in their writing.

S., English teacher, Singapore

Another teacher describes how he develops students' awareness of texts through focussing on texts they bring to class:

Using student-selected content

I ask my students to collect examples of interesting texts they encounter out of class and bring these to class. I use these as the basis for teaching them about different text types and styles. The texts they bring to class are often more interesting than the ones in the book because these are the texts THEY are interested in.

J., English teacher, Ecuador

And here a teacher describes how she addresses learner-centredness in her teaching.

Making connections to students' lives

I try to incorporate learners' actual writing needs into the classroom. For instance, if someone is trying to sell a second-hand textbook or is looking for a new housemate, I ask them to let us use their situation for practice at writing an appealing FOR SALE or FLATMATE WANTED advertisement. This way there is no big division between the writing we do in class and the writing we do in the real world. Even if they are going to use their first language in the actual advertisement, there is a lot of very practical learning that can occur from also producing the text in English.

S., University teacher, UAE

Creative teachers are reflective

Lastly, a quality that creative teachers seem to possess is what we can call critical reflectivity. They review and reflect on their own practice, seek to expand their knowledge and try to find new ideas and practices that they can apply in their own classrooms. They ask questions like these:

- Do I vary the way I teach my lessons?
- Do I try out new activities and assess their role in my classes?
- Do I compare my teaching with the teaching of other teachers to find out creative solutions that they may have developed?
- Can I find ways of making my tasks more creative and hence more engaging for learners? (For example by presenting a reading text as a jigsaw reading).
- Can I adapt the activities I use so that they increase the personal value of my lesson to my learners? (For example by adapting an activity so that it centres on the students' lives rather than on characters in a textbook?)

Here is how one teacher engages in this process of critical reflection:

Reflecting through journal-writing

I keep a teaching journal in which I jot down thoughts and reflections on my teaching. I try to take 30 minutes or so, once a week, to look back at my teaching and reflect on things of interest, or issues that arose that I need to think more about. If I have tried out a new activity and it worked particularly well, I may make a note of it for future reference. I find journal-writing to be a useful consciousness-raising tool. It helps me focus on things that I may otherwise forget and helps me make better decisions about my future teaching. It's interesting to read things I wrote at different times to get a sense of my understanding of myself as a teacher.

E., English teacher, Mexico

Getting feedback from learners

One way that I help myself remain reflective on my teaching is to regularly ask my learners to scribble on a piece of paper at the end of a morning's teaching what they remember about the class. This can be very telling. Sometimes the learners refer to something that I didn't pay much attention to, and that makes me wonder why it was so salient for them and not for me. Sometimes I realize that they are more focused on the content of what we are writing about than the strategies, and skills and elements that contribute to effective written texts. This information is extremely valuable as it gives me an inkling of how the learners perceive what goes on in class and gives me the opportunity to make adjustments to my practice where I think this is needed.

S., University teacher, UAE

HOW TEACHERS APPLY CREATIVITY IN THEIR CLASSROOMS

How does having some of the traits I have described so far influence the way a creative teacher teaches his or her class? We see a creative disposition reflected in several different dimensions of creative teachers' lessons.

Creative teachers make use of an eclectic choice of methods

Typically rather than being bound to a particular method, creative teachers often adopt an approach that might be called 'principled eclecticism'. In other words, they do not choose methods and procedures at random but according to the needs of their class. They use a wide variety of teaching approaches and a wide range of resources and activities. Instead of depending on a single method, creativity is promoted by a mixture and combination of styles.

Using a blend of methods

I teach at a private language school where learners from all over the world come to study five days a week for anything from two weeks to two years. In order to keep learners engaged for that many hours, one methodology simply doesn't cut the mustard. I've lived through quite a few briefly fashionable movements and gleefully looted whatever I could from each. With more experience, one blends them all and develops a best practice which utilises anything that works with one's own particular learners.

P., New Zealand

Combining the best of process and product activities

In my writing classes if I were only going to use one approach, the learners would have packed up and gone home a long time ago! I try and use lots of different approaches, partly because I know that different approaches will suit different learners and also because I think different approaches have different strengths. With more advanced learners, I use modelling a lot, where I encourage learners to help me collaboratively construct a piece of text in the classroom. This is because much composition is essentially private and I believe that learners need to see how it's done and particularly to observe the trial and error process that occurs when different word choices and sentence structures are experimented with.

But it is also important to vary activities so that at other times I focus on the micro-level of text and ask learners to look at individual sentences and word choices and comment on the impact of presenting a sentence in one way rather than another. Many of my learners seem to do better work at this detailed level of analysis when they have another learner to bounce off, so pair work is useful here.

To offset these product focused activities, I regularly include periods of continuous writing where learners are encouraged to write as much as they can within a limited period of time, focusing on getting ideas down on paper and not worrying about accuracy. One thing that has worked very well with this is to ask learners to produce a graph on which they record the topic they are writing about and the date and the number of words they produce each time. If I allocate approximately the same amount of time to each continuous writing session, learners begin to notice that over time they are producing more words in the time available and this is very motivating. They also notice that certain topics (which one member of the class chooses each time) are more successful for them than others, and this provides an interesting point of conversation about the relationship between familiarity and fluency.

S., UAE

Creative teachers use activities which have creative dimensions

Teaching creatively means assessing activities and materials for their potential to support creative teaching. Researchers have identified a number of dimensions of creative tasks: they are said to involve open-ended problem solving, to be adapted to the abilities of the participants, and to be carried out under constraints (Burton, 2010; Lubart, 1994). Some of the features that Dornyei (2001) identifies as productive language learning tasks can also be seen to promote creative responses:

Challenge: tasks in which learners solve problems, discover something, overcome obstacles, or find information;

Interesting content: topics that students already find interesting and that they would want to read about outside of class, such as stories we find about sports and entertainment personalities we find on YouTube and the internet;

The personal element: activities that make connections to the learners' lives and concerns;

The novelty element: aspects of an activity that are new or different or totally unexpected;

The intriguing element: tasks that concern ambiguous, problematic, paradoxical, controversial, contradictory or incongruous material stimulate curiosity;

Individual choice: they look for tasks which give students a personal choice. For example students can choose their own topics to write about in an essay or choose their own topics and group members in a discussion activity;

Tasks that encourage risk taking: teachers do not want their students to be so worried about making mistakes that they feel reluctant to take part in activities. Reward them for effort and not only for success;

Tasks that encourage original thought: activities that require an original response. So instead of comprehension questions after a reading passage that test recall, they seek to use tasks that encourage a personal and individual response to what the student has read;

The fantasy element: activities that engage the learners' fantasy and that invite the learners to use their imagination for creating make-believe stories, identifying with fictional characters or acting out imaginary situations.

Here are examples of creative tasks that reflect some of these characteristics:

Making use of a personal element

Even though my students don't seem to like writing in class, I realised that they do quite a bit of writing in their daily lives, in the form of tweets and Facebook updates for example. I created a twitter account and a Google+ page for our class and got students to start writing short messages in response to each other. Gradually I assigned them different roles and had everyone contribute different parts to a short story we wrote collaboratively. The students loved it as it made the activity more familiar to their out-of-class experiences.

C., English teacher, Colombia

Encouraging original thought

In my Business writing course we have to work with lots of very routine texts such as email messages, blog posts and business letters. To make it more interesting, I ask students at the start of the semester to invent their own company, logo, staff list, and products so that they can use this material when they are developing their own scenarios and situations throughout the semester rather than having to stick rigidly to examples in the textbook. In this way, they create a kind of personal narrative throughout the semester, telling different stories about what has happened in the company and what they need to communicate about.

M., English teacher, Peru

Here a teacher describes the use of an activity with a fantasy element:

Making use of fantasy

One of my learners popped into my office the other day and asked me if I had a minute to read something written on his telephone. I was intrigued. When I read it, I saw that it was the opening lines of a thriller, rich with description of place and person. Because he's in my Research Writing course, I had no idea he had such a lively imagination and an ability to write such creative text, so I asked him how we could find a way of seeing more of his talent for words in his research writing. He took a risk in showing me that writing but I figure that he did so because he wanted me to know what he is capable of. Since that day I've encouraged him to be as creative as possible during our free writing sessions and to focus on personal links to the rather academic and serious topic that he is exploring in his research paper.

S., University teacher, UAE

And another example of a teacher encouraging original thought.

Encouraging original thought

My students chose to read a story about the difficulty a handicapped child encountered the first time he leaves home alone and travels by bus. During the journey he is tricked into carrying a package by a man on the bus. He becomes confused and decides to go to the police station, where the package is discovered to contain drugs. The police officer believes the boy is faking his illness, and the story ends with the police officer discussing the need to send the boy to prison. After reading the story I asked my students to draft the official report that the Youth Aid officer wrote describing her interview with the child which provided a recommendation for how the Social Services should deal with the incident. The next day I asked them to draft a diary entry by the same Youth Aid officer, based on her personal impressions of the child and her reaction to the police's handling of the situation. These kinds of imaginary tasks go beyond the literal content which is presented to them in the texts they read and instead stimulates their imagination.

S., English teacher, Singapore

Creative teachers teach in a flexible way and often adjust and modify their teaching during lessons

Flexibility is another feature we often observe in the lessons of creative teachers. Flexibility in teaching means being able to switch between different styles and modes of teaching during the lesson, for example, if necessary changing the pace of the lesson and giving more space and time to learners. The teacher may not need to refer to a lesson plan because he or she is able to create effective lessons through monitoring the learners' response to teaching activities and creating learning opportunities around important teaching moments. This kind of teaching can be viewed as a kind of skilled improvisation. Here is how one teacher describes teaching as finding what she calls "teachable moments".

Using teachable moments

It's important to choose teachable moments in a lesson. As we teach each day, life continues to throw us different curve balls. Some of life's changes can easily become teachable moments. Later on, students may or may not remember if they earned a 20 in your class, but if you share a "teachable moment" story, they will likely remember that class for a long time. Remember though, they should be teachable MOMENTS. Do not allow students to move off of your plan for the day with their stories and questions. Set a time limit; share your story; move on with the lesson.

C., English teacher, Mexico

And here another teacher describes how she makes use of "teachable moments".

Making the most of teachable moments

The longer I teach the more often "teachable moments" emerge in my teaching. It might be a topic, it might be a type of text, it might be a situation - many prompts can invite me to share a story or an experience with my learners which relates to the lesson goals. Usually I find these diversions are helpful; sometimes they relieve tension when we have been working hard on something. For instance, one day I was working through some examples with my EAP class of how to integrate another writer's ideas into my own text. In the example I was using, one of the learners suddenly stopped me to ask about the name of one of the authors in the in-text citation. Since I had noticed that my learners frequently confused the first name with the family name of Western authors, this gave me a perfect opportunity to draw attention to the names of the authors in the text and to ask them to suggest what the citation would be if each of them had written the original text. Personalizing the example in this way, and being willing to be diverted from the focus of the activity at hand is sometimes necessary. I usually tell myself if one learner has thought it important enough to ask the question, others are likely to be wondering the same thing. It's important to be ready to let the learners' agenda take over at times.

P., English teacher, New Zealand

Creative teachers often improvise around their teaching materials, moving back and forth between book-based input and teacher-initiated input. Hence, even though a teacher may teach the same lesson from a textbook many times, each time he or she teaches it becomes a different lesson due to the improvisations the teacher initiates during teaching.

Creative teachers look for new ways of doing things

Learning to teach means mastering the formats of different kinds of lessons – reading lessons, conversation lessons, listening lessons, and so on. Lessons are structured in different ways depending on their content but typically consist of openings, tasks, and closings. Delivering lessons over time, teachers develop routines and procedures that enable these dimensions of lessons to be carried out efficiently and effortlessly. But there is a tendency for teaching to become increasingly standardized - the ‘one size fits all’ approach – particularly when teachers are working within a prescribed curriculum and teaching towards tests. This often results in a teacher working from pre-packed materials such as a textbook and “transmitting” it efficiently. This is perhaps appropriate at the beginning stages of a teacher’s career but should not characterize the lessons of experienced teachers. Here are some comments by a teacher on how she seeks to introduce variety into familiar activities.

Giving learners choices

I find that the easiest way to do something new in the lesson is to invite the learners to make the decisions about different aspects of the activities. There is no reason why the teacher has to decide which activities to focus on or in which order to complete them. There are also many possibilities for arranging the grouping of learners as they work on tasks, from individual to pairs to small groups. I try and work through different aspects of lesson organization and systematically vary the following: text type, audience, purpose, skill focus, learning configuration (individuals, pairs, groups, whole class). I also routinely ask the learners to tell me how long they believe they will need in order to complete a particular activity. They have a much better idea than me and I always make sure I write some kind of “extension task” on the board while they are working, so that anyone who finishes early has something else to do.

C., English teacher, Mexico

Making links between different skills

An opportunity to focus on writing sometimes emerges unexpectedly during another kind of lesson – such as a speaking or a reading lesson. For example, the other day we were reading a text about Global Warming which was interesting but began in a very dull way. So I started talking about the importance of grabbing the reader’s attention at the start when you are writing a text, and we began brainstorming different ways of rewriting the opening sentence in order to make the text more interesting and effective. After about 10 minutes, we had come up with several alternatives as well as a list of strategies for use when trying to attract the reader’s attention. Linking reading and writing in this way models for students just how much they can learn by reading ‘as a writer’.

S., English teacher, Singapore

Creative teachers customize their lessons

Creative teachers develop custom-made lessons that match their students’ needs and interests or adapt and customize the book to match their students’ interests. While in many cases, a book may work perfectly well without the need for much adaptation, in some cases different levels of adaptation may be needed. Through the process of adaptation, the creative teacher personalizes the text, making it a better teaching resource, and individualizes it for a particular group of learners.

Adapting the textbook

In using international textbooks, some of the topics included can be problematic for both students and teachers. For example, when asked who John Lennon or Nelson Mandela were, my Cambodian students had absolutely no idea, let alone how to the use of the information about these people in the book to practice specific rules of grammar and discourse. In my current course book, there are sections where my students are introduced to the present perfect at the early Pre-Intermediate level, by presenting information about famous people like these, a common practice in foreign course books. For various reasons, Cambodian students have very limited knowledge of famous people and places outside of their country. Therefore, trying to introduce new language and unfamiliar content at the same time creates an unnecessary learning burden for my students. To help connect learning English to their own lives, I generally localize the content of the lesson by using names of people and other information that my students are familiar with, which helps them connect learning of English with their own knowledge and interests.

T., English teacher, Cambodia

Personalizing activities from the textbook

Another way of making writing classes learner-centred is to encourage the learners to contribute to designing the tasks that we complete. One easy way to do this is to take a task printed in the textbook and invite the learners to personalize it by making it relevant to them. For instance, if they have been asked to write a description of their town or city for a tourist book, I encourage them to focus on something highly local, perhaps their neighbourhood that only they will know about. Then, when they have written their description, I collect them in and redistribute them to see if others can guess which part of the city is being described. It seems that once they start using the names of local areas and landmarks, their creative juices start flowing and the end result is a text in which they have invested more time and energy. This also makes it more interesting when learners share their writing with each other.

S., University teacher, UAE

Encouraging students to question the textbook

I have to work with a writing textbook which is rather prescriptive. It lays down a lot of rules about how things should be done in different types of texts and leaves very little to the imagination. At first, I found this rather limiting but now I use it as a talking point at the start of each lesson. I actively encourage the students to comment on the extent to which they believe the approach recommended by the textbook would work in every context and whether it is possible to generalize about how to produce a particular kind of text in every situation. Of course, the learners realize that the textbook writer cannot anticipate every situation and they are very creative in these discussions, often mentioning aspects of their culture which would oblige writers to do something differently. In this way, I believe that questioning the textbook 'rules' ends up teaching them more about writing and gives them a more sophisticated understanding of the way that context affects writing

J., English teacher, Ecuador.

Creative teachers make use of technology

Creative use of technology in the classroom can support the development of imagination, problem-solving, risk-taking, and divergent thinking on the part of teachers and students. How do teachers use technology in this way?

Using blogging as a resource

A productive way of engaging my students and helping them to improve their writing skills is through Creative nonfiction (CNF). CNF involves using creative literary techniques and devices when writing about non-fiction events, e.g., diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, essays, obituaries, journalism, travel writing. I have incorporated a CNF strand into my writing course - blogging.

I begin by showcasing blogs to the class as a whole using the classroom computer and screen, e.g., a leading newspaper, The Guardian, ran a blogging competition and I bring up the winning sites, e.g. 'Scary duck. Not scary. Not a duck.' This blog is full of short, often witty pieces, about whatever interests the blogger. The blogs express a particular point of view, are funny and aimed at a younger adult audience, which reflects the age range and interests of my students. The blog is reader-friendly consisting of short, lively texts liberally punctuated with photographs. I find that my students engage very quickly. I look in more detail at one of the blogs eliciting ways that the writing is creative, e.g., use of adjectives, irony, voice, register, metaphor. My students bring their tablets, laptops, smart phones to class and after the showcase I give them the web address for three other suitable blogs and ask the students to browse them and be prepared to comment.

I then set up their blogging task. Each student has to set up an online blog and then blog on five separate subject areas from a choice of eight subject areas: food, music, transport, sport, media, politics, religion, fashion. Students are encouraged to read and interact with their fellow students' blogs. After each set of blogs I give a whole class commentary on selected student blogs highlighting areas of successful creative writing, e.g., alliteration, original use of adjectives, realization of a distinctive voice. I also give personal, online feedback to my students about their blogs through one to one emails. The intrinsic interest of their chosen material and freedom to express their own point of view has a highly motivating effect on my students and there is a crossover into their academic writing, which I foster in class and through individual feedback to their academic writing tasks.

D., English teacher and writer, UK

Creative teachers seek creative ways to motivate students

Creative teachers express a desire to motivate students, to challenge them, to engage their curiosity, to encourage deep learning rather than surface learning. They try to develop a classroom atmosphere that encourages and motivates students in their learning. One English teacher I met recently described how she decided to become a teacher because of a particular teacher she had at high school.

I started to like English when I was in high school. I started to enjoy it a little more because of a teacher I had. She was really a role model for me. The way she taught us was really great. She went out of her way to make her lessons interesting and engaging. We never knew what to expect in her classes and that was what made her teaching so great. And that made me love English and it made me make the decision "Ok, now I want to become an English teacher".

There are of course many ways in which motivation can be addressed in a lesson. For example:

Using activities that showcase students' talent

One fun way in which I introduce motivation into writing classes is to ask students who have written a narrative which includes a lot of interaction, to turn it into a movie script. This provides really excellent language practice with

a strong focus on interaction. The work can also be shared by two students so that they have fun improvising the dialogue and then writing it down.

S., university teacher, UAE

Using activities from the learners' world

My students all play video games so I have found this a good way to motivate them. This year I introduced digital games in class for the teaching of writing. It sure raised some eyebrows among my colleagues at first! I linked it to our writing curriculum as closely as I could – for example, when discussing different ways to organise a piece of writing, I asked students to describe their favourite games and the way the stories within them are built up. I also found some games that involve a great deal of language use. Ace Attorney is one in which players take the role of an attorney and have to develop a strong case, present it convincingly and so on. Students created their own cases as practice in argument writing and had to respond to each other's writing to practice writing rebuttals.

S., English teacher, Singapore

Less creative students can also be linked with more creative and imaginative ones so that they can benefit from seeing the techniques, strategies and approaches that others use in the creative process.

Encouraging creative collaboration

Last term, my intermediate level students were assigned the task of producing a two-minute PSA (Public Service Announcement / Ad) to be included in their final presentation on a social issue of their choice. Since we had an Apple lab in the school, I thought it would be exciting for us to learn to use the iMovie software installed in the Apple computers (they were all PC users). First, I produced a two-minute video myself over the weekend. When they saw how I could create a video out of a short recording made with my cheap Nokia phone, they were keen. In our introductory lab session, they came with some video recordings shot with their iPhones so that they could 'fiddle' with the different functions and effects available in the software. I walked them through the basic steps of importing the recordings, cutting up segments, inserting transitions and adding visual and sound effects. But quite quickly, they took over the learning themselves in their groups. Following the introductory session, they worked in small groups and made new video recordings for their PSA. The next five to six hours were spread over two more sessions in the lab. They completed their two-minute video productions by the second session! I was amazed at how quickly they figured out a software they had never used before. They were basically in their element, and the mode used for the task was something they were cognitively linked to. This is the generation of 'digital natives' and when we deliberately plan for language learning to take place in a multi-modal setting, one they feel comfortable in, we stand a good chance of engaging them instantly.

S., English teacher, Singapore

HOW CAN CREATIVE TEACHING BE SUPPORTED IN THE SCHOOL?

One way of considering creativity is to take a laissez faire approach and assume that it is over to the individual teacher. Schools have other concerns and are judged by how well their students perform on national exams, on how much use the school makes of technology, or on the quality of the students the school is able to attract. But a commitment to creative teaching requires a change in mind set within a school. As Fisher comments (2004, p. 17):

Success in any grand project needs help from other, means making alliances, means benefiting from the distributed intelligence of others – developing the ‘info-structure’ – interconnectivity through learning conversations with others.

There are a number of ways in which schools can *discourage* creative teaching.

- When the curriculum, tests, and constant monitoring drives, teaching and teachers cannot depart from established or approved practices. There is too much of an emphasis on book learning, rote learning and test scores.
- Where teachers are not given time to be creative.
- When teachers are not encouraged to be creative and innovate or to develop an individual and personal teaching style.
- When teachers are stuck with fixed routines and procedures

And here is a good example of how a school can *discourage* creative teaching rather than encourage it:

Discouraging creativity

Sometimes, the institution may not allow teachers to adapt their coursebooks, and this can become a problem for the teacher, especially for someone who is trying to meet learners' needs and teach creatively. Once I was teaching in a school and I was given a coursebook to use with a particular group of students. When I said 'Thanks, I'll see what activities I can add to it' I was told in no uncertain terms that I was not to do this. The students, I was told, measure their progress in terms of how far they have got through the coursebook and the company that was funding the classes did the same thing. If I added anything to my lessons, I was told, the students weren't going to progress and the Director wouldn't be able to show the company how far they had progressed.

B., teacher trainer, Australia

By contrast, a school that believes in the value of creative teaching expresses confidence in teachers and encourages adaptation and innovation, that is open to new ideas and innovation and that supports, encourages and rewards creative teaching. Fisher (2004, p. 17) characterizes a creative school as follows:

The creative school is a place where individuals, pupils and teachers are:

Motivated

- *purpose, ultimate goals and shared destiny;*
- *openness to new ideas, innovation and enquiry;*
- *passion to succeed, willing to take risks, accepting difference and diversity;*

Given time and responsibility for creative activity, involving;

- *all in the search for creative solutions;*
- *being tolerant of mistakes in the search for better solutions;*
- *avoiding impulsivity, allowing time for practice and for ideas to come;*

Able to collaborate with partners to share creativity and ideas including:

- *learning partners to generate, extend and provide feedback on ideas;*
- *collaborating as part of a team on creative projects and productions;*
- *developing creative connections and links beyond the organization.*

Here are some ways in which schools can *encourage* rather than *discourage* creative teaching.

The school helps teachers recognize and share what is creative in their own practice.

There are usually creative and innovative teachers in every school, but often their teaching skills are not necessarily recognized or familiar to others in the school. Here are some examples of how schools provide opportunities for teachers to share creative approaches to teaching:

In our school we are encouraged to post notes about innovative techniques we use on a noticeboard in the teachers' room.

J., English teacher, Ecuador

We have our own website where we exchange ideas and resources we have developed.

E., English teacher, Mexico

We have regular brown-bag lunches where we share accounts of new things and innovations we have tried out in our classes.

C., English teacher, Columbia

The school encourages creative partnership.

We are often most creative when we get the support and encouragement of others. There are several ways in which this can be achieved.

- Through team teaching
- Through peer observation
- Through shared lesson planning

Using shared lesson-planning

We have been implementing the process of shared lesson-planning. How it works is we work in groups of three or four and take a unit from our textbook or some other materials that we might use as the basis for a class, and brainstorm different ways in which the material could be taught. We try to be as creative as possible and it's amazing how many different ideas people can come up with. Then we teach the lesson to our own class and the other group members observe the lesson. Later we meet again to discuss and review how the lesson went

M., English teacher, Peru

The school provides resources to support creative teaching

If teachers want to develop creative teaching resources to support their teaching, they need access to a good resource centre with up-to-date books, magazines, realia, projectors, technology, whiteboards, etc. that teachers can make use of to complement their lessons. An environment and culture that encourages creativity and provides the resources teachers need in order to realize their creative potential is a key component of the creative capital needed to support creative teaching.

The school rewards creative teachers

A school can acknowledge the value of creative teachers by recognizing their contributions in different ways. For example,

- by acknowledging them when appropriate
- by giving them opportunities to mentor novice teachers
- by encouraging them to share their ideas with others through brown-bag lunch sessions, participation in seminars and workshops

So to summarise the school's role in fostering and supporting creative teaching:

- ***The school helps teachers recognize and share what is creative in their own practice.***
- ***The school encourages creative partnership.***
- ***The school provides resources to support creative teaching***
- ***The school rewards creative teachers***

CONCLUSIONS

I have focussed here on just one aspect of teaching. There are many other important dimensions to effective teaching. But adding the concept of creative teaching to our understanding of what it means to be an effective language teacher has benefits for teachers, for learners, as well as for schools. For learners, creative teaching helps learners develop their capacities for original ideas and for creative thinking. It also improves the quality of the experiences learners receive and can help learners develop increased levels of motivation and even self-esteem. For the teacher, it provides a source of ongoing professional renewal and satisfaction – since when learners are engaged, motivated, and successful, teaching is motivating for the teacher. For the institution, it can lead to increased levels of satisfaction for both teachers and students as well as contribute to the quality, effectiveness, and reputation of the school. To summarize, creative learners need creative teachers and teachers need to work in schools where creativity is valued and shared.

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