

# How to be a creative teacher

**Richard Watson**

**Todd** has some surprising suggestions.

A creative teacher is likely to use a beneficial variety of activities in the classroom, to be able to adapt a coursebook to meet the needs of the learners, and to design materials and activities tailored to specific classes. Creativity doesn't, however, come naturally to everyone: some people seem to be inherently more creative than others. Nevertheless, I believe it is something that can be developed through a set of simple techniques and I would like to demonstrate here five different ways in which teachers can become more creative in designing activities for their students. These five methods can be used systematically to generate new teaching activities and approaches.

## Method 1:

### Applying non-teaching activities in the language classroom

One obvious source of innovative ideas for the language classroom is the techniques used in other kinds of education, such as corporate training. For example, large-scale problem-solving tasks, such as building a bridge across a stream, which frequently form part of team-building activity weekends for business managers, may also lead to beneficial learning for language students. The need to communicate to function as an effective team is a great stimulus to language learning and usage.

Surprisingly, however, the non-teaching activities originating in contexts where there is no apparent connection to language learning can be even more effective. Some teachers, for instance, have beneficially applied meditation and *tai chi* techniques in language teaching. Others find that computer games requiring a lot of

English, such as *SimCity* and *Championship Manager*, can be used with very positive results in place of multimedia programs specifically designed for teaching English.

My personal favourite source of non-teaching activities which work well in language teaching is children's party games, and I'll give two quick examples of activities based on these.

**Guess who wrote it** is the first. Students are put into groups and are each asked to write down on a slip of blank paper a short answer to a question, such as 'What do you want to learn from this course?' or 'What did you eat last night?'. The answers are collected and the pieces of paper written by students in one group are given to another group. This second group then has to guess which of the students in the first group wrote which answer.

! **MadLips** is the second activity. This provides a useful review of parts of speech. To encourage reader interaction, I won't explain how this works yet, but will just ask you to jot down quickly on a piece of paper an adjective, a verb, a singular noun, and a plural noun. I will come back to this activity at the end of the article (no peeping!).

## Method 2:

### Applying activities from one classroom situation to another

The second technique for designing creative activities also relies on the application of activities from one situation to another, but this time from one language teaching situation to another. With minor tweaks, many activities specifically designed for one



level of students and a particular purpose can be adapted for use with a different level of students and a different purpose.

To show the full potential range of possibilities, I will take an extreme example. Is it possible to adapt an activity originally designed for use on a course teaching executive business presentations so that it can be used with a class of very low-level primary school children? One activity frequently used in business presentation courses is showing a video of a presentation as a model for the learners to give their own presentations. Could a video of a model business presentation be usefully incorporated into a primary classroom? While the answer to this question may seem to be negative, I will show one way in which it could be done with potentially beneficial consequences.

In Thailand, learners of English are infamous for their inability to sound the *s* which ends so many English words. Young Thai children, however, when pretending to speak English, produce something like 'pusswussusswusspuss', heavily emphasising the syllable-final *s*. Using a video as a model, students could be asked to give an imaginary presentation in pretend English. The effects of this may be to boost the students' confidence and to give insights into how they perceive the sounds and rhythms of English.

### Method 3:

#### Varying student and teacher roles

Certain functions in the classroom are typically performed by the teacher, whereas others are more usually undertaken by the learners. For example, teachers typically give explanations, give instructions, elicit information and give feedback, while learners answer questions and do activities. It is relatively easy to swap some of these roles, often with interesting results. Leo van Lier reports the beneficial effects of getting learners to give him instructions for setting up the classroom cassette player; and according to Dheram, peer feedback can also enhance learning.

I have asked students to make their own concordances for words, using the internet as a corpus. A concordance is a list of examples of use of a word, such as the one given above, which was created by one of my students.

Educational Assistant is an educational tool capable of increasing a student's attention, Actions MooWP robots (and puppets) are capable of giving multi-line responses, and these concept is one of a vehicle capable of traversing an antipersonnel minefield Vehicle) project involves building a robot capable of finding and extinguishing a fire autonomous mobile robot navigation prototype system capable of performing office delivery tasks in and built an RC servo 'pup' capable of sitting, standing, walking and barking. created a robot capable of ... well, capable of navigating a maze. A robot capable of juggling 3 balls was built an autonomous mobile robot that is capable of competent, safe behavior. Somehow, the Shadow is capable of generating quasi-real projections of

Concordances are generally prepared by the teacher. Getting the students to make their own, however, means that they can choose which words they are interested in learning about and they can choose the examples they want to include (you may notice that all of the examples of *capable* in the concordance above concern robots, a topic of particular interest to the student who created it). In this way, and in common with many activities where typical teacher roles are taken on by the learners, the learners become more independent and more responsible for their own learning.

### Method 4:

#### Attribute listing

The second and third methods discussed above are, in fact, specific examples of the generalisable approach to creative thinking called *attribute listing*. This method involves making a list of the characteristics of something and then varying these characteristics to see the consequences. For example, if you want to create a new design for a car, you might list some typical attributes of cars, such as the number of wheels and the location of the engine, and then vary these characteristics. You could then consider the consequences of designing a car with three or six wheels, or with an engine at the back or in the middle.

The same approach can be used with teaching activities. In Method 2, we looked at varying the level and the purpose of an activity, and in Method 3 we examined the consequences of varying roles. Other attributes that could be varied include class organisation, skill, material, topic, timing and assessment.

For example, student presentations are usually given individually. Varying the organisation, what might be the effects of simultaneous group

presentations? We might set these up so that four students present simultaneously, and in the ensuing din have to project their voices clearly and use extensive body language to help the audience understand. Alternatively, we might focus on coherence and cohesion by asking the four students to give consecutive sentences so that together they make a clear presentation.

Varying the skill can also have interesting consequences. Pairwork dictations usually involve one person speaking and another listening and writing. What are the effects of having the first person write and the other read and speak? Alternatively, we may be familiar with jigsaw reading, but how could we organise jigsaw listening, speaking or writing, and what would the effects be?

! Before I continue, again to stimulate reader interaction, I would like you to choose two numbers between 1 and 10.

### Method 5:

#### Combining activities

The last method for creating new activities is to combine two familiar activities. There already exists a vast pool of activities that can be used in the language classroom and new activities can be created by combining some of these.

Typical activities used in language classrooms include:

- 1 Group roleplay
- 2 Reading aloud
- 3 Spot the difference pairwork
- 4 Internet searching
- 5 Dictation
- 6 Describe and draw pairwork
- 7 Multiple-choice exams
- 8 Filling in missing words in a text
- 9 Peer correction
- 10 Resequencing lines in a song



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Match the numbers you thought of at the end of the last section with two activities in the list above. What would the result of combining these two activities be?

For example, if you chose numbers 1 and 2, you might have some students reading aloud from a text while others listen and try to roleplay what they hear. Such an activity would focus on the clarity of the students who were reading and the fluency of listening comprehension of the roleplaying students. If, on the other hand, you chose 1 and 3, you may have two groups of students giving similar roleplays while the students in the audience have to spot the differences between the two performances. The variations here are nearly limitless, although some combinations are more

useful and practical than others and you need to make sure the combination you use makes sense pedagogically – the random number idea is just to open up the possibility of combinations you might otherwise not think of.



I hope these ideas can stimulate more creativity in teachers. We do have to be wary, however, of creativity for its own sake. New creative activities can add variety and interest to our lessons, but tried and trusted activities should remain the backbone of our teaching.

Before I finish, I ought to explain about the *MadLips* activity introduced earlier in this article. This involves eliciting words with specified parts of speech from the students, and then putting them into a prepared text with some blanks in it. As an example, you might try putting the words you thought of earlier into the blanks in the following text and see what emerges.

I found this article .....  
(adj). I can ..... (verb)  
the ideas and I would like to use them in  
my ..... (singular  
noun). I plan to share the ideas with my  
..... (plural noun). **ETP**

Dheram, P K 'Feedback as a two-bullock cart: A case study of teaching writing' *ELT Journal*, 49, 2 1995

van Lier, L *Interaction in the Language Curriculum: Awareness, Autonomy and Authenticity* Longman 1996



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## COMPETITION

If you enjoyed Siân Morgan and Liz Long's article on page 8, you might like to try your hand at completing these recent additions to the English language. Send your answers to ETP by 25 January 2004. Six lucky winners, drawn at random from the correct entries, will each receive a copy of *Teaching English One-to-One* by Priscilla Osborne, published by Modern English Publishing.

Read the definitions and complete the words by adding the missing consonants.

- 1 A refillable diary or personal organiser used for keeping addresses and appointments  
\_ I \_ O \_ A \_
- 2 Time taken off between school and university  
\_ A \_ \_ E A \_
- 3 Travelling around the world, often as in 2, usually on a tight budget  
\_ A \_ \_ A \_ I \_
- 4 A more politically correct way of saying *mothering*, adopted in the 90s  
\_ A \_ E \_ I \_
- 5 Making company employees redundant  
\_ O \_ \_ I \_ I \_
- 6 A professional you might employ to help you reach your work-life balance  
\_ I \_ E \_ O A \_
- 7 A short sleep in the middle of the day to allow you to work longer hours  
\_ O \_ E \_ \_ A \_
- 8 An early morning meal during which you work  
\_ O \_ E \_ \_ E A \_ A \_
- 9 The fashionable beginnings of a beard  
\_ E \_ I \_ \_ E \_ \_ U \_ \_ E
- 10 A man who does his share of domestic work and childcare  
\_ E \_ \_ A \_

### COMPETITION RESULTS

Congratulations to the winners of our 'Famous numbers' competition, who will each receive a copy of *Using the Mother Tongue* by Sheelagh Deller and Mario Rinvuluci (DELTA Publishing):

**Michele Sibial**, Toulouse, France, **Ivana Mandic**, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, **Hamish Buchan**, Tokyo, Japan, **Nataša Gajšt**, Maribor, Slovenia, **Albertina Glória Pereira Guedes Carvalho**, Carreço, Portugal, **Rodney Tan Chai Whatt**, Melaka, Malaysia

The answers were Jeremy Harmer, Tessa Woodward, Scott Thornbury, Luke Prodromou, Sue Kay, Judy Garton-Sprenger, Ingrid Freebairn and Philip Prowse

### There's still time to enter our 'Tricky abbreviations' competition.

Details are on page 20 of ETP Issue 28. Six winners will each receive a copy of *FCE Interactive*, published by DELTA Publishing. The closing date for entries is 25 October. Don't forget to include your full name and postal address!

#### Competition entries and all correspondence to:

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