

# **Creativity**

## **in English Language Teaching**

---

EDITED BY DANIEL XERRI  
AND ODETTE VASSALLO



Published by ELT Council  
Ministry for Education and Employment  
Great Siege Road  
Floriana VLT 2000  
Malta

Copyright for whole volume © ELT Council 2016

Copyright for individual papers remains vested  
in the contributors, to whom applications for  
rights to reproduce material should be made.

First published 2016

ISBN 978-99957-1-000-2

Designed by John Wilson Independent Studios.  
Printed in Malta by Progress Press.



# Creativity in ELT: an introduction

**Daniel Xerri and Odette Vassallo**

*ELT Council, Malta*

Creativity is one of the most exciting concepts that currently inform ELT. The attainment of creativity in the classroom is most probably dependent on teachers' own creative practices. However, these practices need not always be thought of as generating novelty out of nothing. This book consists of a selection of papers based on talks and workshops delivered at the 4th ELT Malta Conference. The book's title is derived from the theme of the conference and it brings together the perspectives of a group of international and Maltese experts in ELT, all of whom address the idea that creativity is a vital aspect of language learning and teaching.

## PREAMBLE

It seems symptomatic of the social media era that most people's diet of inspirational quotes is nowadays supplied by social networking sites, awash as they are with the pithy quips and maxims of a host of enlightened writers, artists and celebrities. What was once the job of *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* is now being done by Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest among others. The original source of these quotes is rarely cited and their context and what provoked them is never given any importance. It seems as if we have all read Albert Einstein, William Shakespeare and Mahatma Gandhi, we have all listened to Steve Jobs's (2005) Stanford University commencement speech, and we have all watched *Dead Poets Society*, *Forrest Gump*, *Rocky Balboa* and *The Pursuit of Happiness*. In the process of ultra skimming through countless posts and tweets, with some luck such inspirational quotes are read and shared. However, if they are not properly digested the words would not be worthy of being termed 'inspirational'.

Recently, a school in Nicaragua used Instagram to post the following quote by the American author Joseph Chilton Pearce: "To live a creative life, we must lose our fear of being wrong." This quote was meant to encourage its students not to be afraid of making mistakes in their struggle to master the English language. Pearce wrote a number of books about child development and this particular quote is perhaps one of the most famous pronouncements on creativity. Beyond the school's use of the quote as a means of goading students to experiment with the target language, this sentence should also resonate with teachers in their endeavour to be creative practitioners. However, before discussing what this entails, it is perhaps better to start by attempting to define creativity.

## A DEFINITION

Despite the burgeoning popularity of the term 'creativity' in ELT and education more broadly, it is most probable that conceptions of creativity are highly varied and at times conflicting. Hence, for our purposes, it is vital to establish a definition of creativity that makes sense within the context of ELT, one which derives from two converging definitions. In *The Act of Creation*, Arthur Koestler (1964) maintains that rather than seeing creativity as the creation of something out of nothing it is more appropriate to conceive of it as the act of rearranging or regrouping already existing elements. He claims that creativity "uncovers, selects, re-shuffles, combines, synthesizes already existing facts, ideas, faculties, skills. The more familiar the parts, the more striking the new whole" (Koestler, 1964, p. 120). Hence, creative people are capable of "combining previously unrelated domains of knowledge in such a way that you get more out of the emergent whole than you put in" (Koestler, 1980, p. 344). In an attempt to challenge existing myths and draw on more realistic notions of creativity, Plucker, Beghetto and Dow (2004) propose their own definition: "Creativity is the interaction among *aptitude, process, and environment* by which an individual or group produces a *perceptible product*

that is both *novel and useful* as defined within a *social context*” (p. 90). By fusing Koestler’s (1964, 1980) and Plucker et al.’s (2004) definitions and applying them to ELT, it may be argued that creativity is a democratic phenomenon that all teachers and learners may embrace both as individuals and collaboratively because its strength lies in the interaction of the qualities these possess. However, fostering learners’ creativity in the classroom is well-nigh impossible if one does not identify oneself as a creative practitioner.

## CREATIVE PRACTITIONERS

Some teachers’ misconceptions about what constitutes creativity impede them from positioning themselves as creative practitioners (Xerri, 2013). The myth that creativity is only about creating works of art or enabling learners to be artistic is detrimental to teachers’ efforts to be creative. As language speakers we are all creative individuals. It takes a lot of creativity for a child to acquire a language and for a learner to use the language they are taught. However, as language teachers we can be even more creative when we think of new possibilities for language teaching and learning. Being creative is not exclusive to using arts and crafts, poetry or film in language lessons. While lessons incorporating activities based on those media and genres have the potential to act as creative impulses for learners when the latter demonstrate an “ability to read with imagination, make connections”, create “metaphors and similes by way of explaining and interpreting” such texts (Vassallo, 2016, p. 95), the essence of creativity for teachers goes beyond classroom activities.

Being creative means daring to do things differently, thus expanding the boundaries of what we know about teaching and learning in order to discover new worlds within the confines of our classrooms. In fact, Csikszentmihalyi (1996) defines the creative individual as “someone whose thoughts or actions change a domain, or establish a new domain” (p. 28). Being creative means not just doing what trainers and other experts tell us we should be doing, but rather trusting our intuitions as educators to break new ground, research our practices, experiment with new pedagogies, and try out new activities or spin-offs of things we are used to doing. Being creative means we are not just followers but leaders, not just consumers but creators, not just an audience but sharers. Being creative means we do not hermetically seal our knowledge and experience inside our heads, but rather expressing the willingness to share with others. A community of creative educators is made up of professionals who are constantly learning from each other.

Some teachers are all too willing to sit back and learn from others, fearing that they cannot teach anything to their peers or to themselves, fearing that they have nothing new to say, that they are incapable of being creative. They do what they are instructed to do on a teacher training course, at a conference, or in a methodology book. However, possessing all that knowledge should not hinder

teachers from doing things differently, finding out for themselves what works and what is unlikely to be effective. There is no recipe for the perfect lesson; there is no manual that will ensure success in every single activity with every single student. Being creative means having faith in our expertise as teachers, who are knowledgeable about the learning context, the learners, the language, and the repertoire of methods and approaches at our disposal. Being creative means we do not let the dictums of others straightjacket us, but rather demonstrating the willingness to question everything and to apply multiple perspectives to every issue and problem we encounter.

Creative teachers are not just born creative. Creativity is a state of mind. It is a boundary that we need to cross in order to discover our potential to do things differently and be an inspiration for others. According to Alda (2007), we need to

Have the nerve to go into unexplored territory. Be brave enough to live creatively. The creative is the place where no one else has ever been. It is not the previously known. You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. You can't go there by bus, only by hard work and risk and by not quite knowing what you're doing, but what you'll discover will be wonderful. What you'll discover will be yourself. (pp. 21-22)

Some teachers are uncreative because they allow fear to dominate them. They prefer living in the comfort zone rather than exploring the unknown. Whilst there are practically no more places on Earth for anyone to discover for the first time ever, there is a lot that can still be discovered about language learning and teaching. However, the number of teachers willing to act as explorers is perhaps insufficient. ELT requires as many teachers as possible determined to explore new frontiers.

Being creative means being unafraid to fail, especially since failure is a fundamental part of the teaching and learning experience. Which teacher has not tasted the bitterness of failure at least once over the course of their career? The most brilliant educators are the ones who have failed many times in their quest to achieve success, whether this be an amazing lesson, wonderful feedback, or a learner's attainment of seemingly impossible aims. Being creative means being willing to transcend our fears in order to discover that we can be right sometimes besides being wrong at other times. As de Bono (1990) points out,

The need to be right all the time is the biggest bar to new ideas. It is better to have enough ideas for some of them to be wrong than to be always right by having no ideas at all. (p. 108)

The need to be right all the time is the essence of vertical thinking, which is a problem solving and decision-making approach that entails being selective, analytical and sequential as a means of avoiding failure. According to de Bono

(1990), an “Exclusive emphasis on the need to be right all the time completely shuts out creativity and progress” (p. 108). This is why it is important to use lateral thinking, which consists of both the willingness to perceive things in divergent ways and a series of thinking methods that can be learnt (de Bono, 1982).

## **LEARNING CREATIVITY**

Teacher training programmes at pre- and in-service levels in ELT can play a pivotal role in enabling teachers to learn how to be creative. Such programmes have the potential to develop the knowledge, skills and beliefs that teachers require in order for them to position themselves as creative practitioners. For example, teacher training can provide teachers with the ability to engage in what Koestler (1964) calls bisociative thinking, which is the formation of a new matrix of meaning through the act of combining elements from previously unconnected matrices of thought. Enabling teachers to position themselves as creative practitioners in the classroom should become part of the remit of contemporary teacher training programmes.

In order for teachers to become creative practitioners, teacher training needs to transcend the idea that practitioners should only be provided with practical ideas for the classroom. Pedagogical understanding and subject knowledge have to be complemented by the cultivation of the belief in the potential of creative teaching to engage language learners. To facilitate this, teachers should operate in an environment that possesses optimal conditions crucial to creativity. Generally, this involves a number of influential factors, such as intra- and inter-group interactions, leadership, organisational structure, competition and cohesion.

Teacher training has the potential to foster true creativity in the learning environment by equipping teachers with the means to empower learners to think for themselves and generate their own innovations. Encouraging teachers to engage in creative activities as part of their training might help them to discover their own latent creativity and thus assume the stance of teachers who are willing to teach language in a creative fashion.

The act of enabling teachers to become creative practitioners involves re-evaluating the outcomes and objectives of current training programmes. Teacher training has a major role to play in engendering creativity in the classroom so it is necessary to examine the extent to which trainees are offered opportunities to participate in creative approaches when developing their pedagogical knowledge, skills and beliefs. Just expecting teachers to teach English creatively is not sufficient unless training programmes are themselves an embodiment of creative teaching methods.

## CONCLUSION

The 4th ELT Malta conference spanned over four days, the first of which consisted of a whole-day workshop on creativity and digital literacies in ELT. The conference was composed of six plenaries and 30 workshops. This book brings together a selection of papers based on these sessions. The first group of papers by Alan Maley, Chaz Pugliese, Michela Formosa, Sarah Zammit and JJ Wilson underscore the vital importance of creativity's place in the classroom, especially since it is an intrinsic component of a broad range of human activities, foremost amongst which is language use. The papers by Antonia Clare, Maria Cutajar, Sarah Cutajar and Stephanie Xerri Agius discuss how a culture of creativity can be cultivated in the classroom through the amalgamation of creative and critical thinking, and the mind shift experienced by teachers when they position themselves as creative practitioners. Rebekka Mamo, Alan Marsh, Jean Sciberras, Candy Fresacher and Nicky Hockly illustrate how the use of literature, poetry, art, advertising and mobile devices respectively can act as a means of spurring learners' creativity. The next group of papers by Michael McCarthy, Jeanne McCarten, Kevin Spiteri, William B. Laidlaw, Justyna Rogers and Patricia Vella Briffa explore different language systems and skills, reminding us that language use is perhaps one of the most common creative feats that learners engage in. The final set of papers by Jean Theuma, Larissa Attard and Steve Flinders examine two different language learning contexts, both of which require a high level of communicative ability on the part of learners. The value of creative practices in language learning and teaching is applicable to such contexts and many others.

The papers in this book encourage teachers to lead a creative life rather than limit themselves to creative moments interspersed among non-creative lesson activities. Being creative is not something we do temporarily. It should be a permanent fixture of our professional life. We do not stop being teachers when the lesson ends. Teaching is an intrinsic part of our identity. Similarly, creativity should be a constant feature of our teaching and our professional inquiry as educators within and outside the classroom. However, for that to happen we need to overcome our fear of being wrong. As Robinson (2006) maintains, "if you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original". The authors of the papers collected in this book dare us to lose our fear of being wrong. They dare us to be wrong sometimes. That is how we can be right at other times. That is how we can be creative.

daniel.xerri@um.edu.mt  
odette.vassallo@um.edu.mt

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Parts of this paper have featured in the following publications:

Xerri, D. (2015, June). On teachers' creative life. *MATEFL Newsletter*, 11-13.

Xerri, D. (2016, July-August). Teacher creativity. *IATEFL Voices*, 251, 5.



## REFERENCES

- Alda, A. (2007). *Things I overheard while talking to myself*. New York: Random House.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1996). *Creativity: Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention*. New York: HarperPerennial.
- de Bono, E. (1982). *Thinking course: Powerful tools to transform your thinking*. Harlow: BBC Active.
- de Bono, E. (1990). *Lateral thinking: Creativity step by step*. New York: HarperPerennial.
- Jobs, S. (2005, June). How to live before you die [Online video]. TED. Retrieved from [http://www.ted.com/talks/steve\\_jobs\\_how\\_to\\_live\\_before\\_you\\_die](http://www.ted.com/talks/steve_jobs_how_to_live_before_you_die)
- Koestler, A. (1964). *The act of creation*. London: Hutchinson.
- Koestler, A. (1980). *Bricks to Babel*. New York: Random House.
- Plucker, J. A., Beghetto, R. A., & Dow, G. T. (2004). Why isn't creativity more important to educational psychologists? Potentials, pitfalls, and future directions in creativity research. *Educational Psychologist*, 39(2), 83-96.
- Robinson, K. (2006, February). How schools kill creativity [Online video]. TED. Retrieved from [https://www.ted.com/talks/ken\\_robinson\\_says\\_schools\\_kill\\_creativity](https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity)
- Vassallo, O. (2016). Enhancing responses to literary texts with L2 learners: An empirically derived pedagogical framework. In M. Burke, O. Fialho & S. Zyngier (Eds.), *Scientific approaches to literature in learning environments* (pp. 81-101). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Xerri, D. (2013, Autumn). The value of creativity: Language teachers as creative practitioners. *Teaching English*, 3, 23-25.