

# Creative writing

**“Some of the reasons for teachers’ lack of confidence with respect to poetry writing might have to do with their beliefs and attitudes in relation to poetry and poetry pedagogy”**

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## About the Author

Throughout his teaching career that spans over 40 years, Professor Alan Maley has been a strong advocate of the use of literature and creative writing in English language teaching. After working for the British Council in the UK, Yugoslavia, Ghana, Italy, France, China, and India, he then worked in universities in Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia. For 25 years he was the series editor for the OUP *Resource Books for Teachers* and has published over 40 books and numerous articles. For the past 11 years he has been involved with the Asia Teacher Writers’ group, which publishes original stories and poems in English for use with students in the Asia region. In 2013, he co-founded **The C Group** (Creativity for Change in Language Education).

## English teachers positioning themselves as poets

DANIEL XERRI

*Highlighting the significance of targeting not only teachers’ knowledge and skills with respect to poetry writing but also their beliefs and attitudes, Daniel Xerri argues that in order to engage as many students as possible with the writing of poems, teachers need to be equipped with the tools to lead poetry writing activities.*

## Introduction

On a recent research visit to Australia, I observed a number of poetry writing workshops led by established poets and interviewed these poets together with English teachers and teacher

educators. One of the most worrying themes that cut across all the interviews I conducted was teachers’ lack of confidence in relation to the teaching of poetry writing. While the teachers I interviewed were enthusiastic about these workshops, they expressed doubts about their own abilities to achieve what the poets were doing with their students. I have come across this kind of insecurity in a number of international educational contexts and what is particularly disquieting for me is the overdependence on published poets to provide young people with an opportunity to enjoy the craft of writing poetry. By relying almost exclusively on established poets to teach creative writing, teachers are minimising students’ engagement with poetry writing given that the latter can only take place when a poet is invited to the school. Moreover, since most often the logistics of such a visit make it impossible for all the school’s students to attend the workshop, only a few students are fortunate enough to benefit from the poet’s visit.

Some of the reasons for teachers’ lack of confidence with respect to poetry writing might have to do with their beliefs and attitudes in relation to poetry and poetry pedagogy. Xerri (2013a), for example, shows how teachers’ beliefs affect their classroom practices and influence the way students approach poetry, most often undermining the enjoyment of a poem in class. Moreover, the belief that poetry writing requires a talent that one is born with is another obstacle to its prevalence in the English classroom (Xerri, 2013b). Teachers’ enthusiasm for poetry plays a crucial role in boosting students’ engagement but this is difficult to achieve if teachers refrain from reading poetry. The children’s poet John Rice (as cited in Xerri, 2012) points out,

“I don’t think they do read it as much as we suppose they do because sometimes if I mention a poet’s name to a teacher, they don’t know who that poet is, and if I mention certain poems or certain anthologies, I realize that it’s a very restricted canon of work that teachers have read” (p. 114).

Another children’s poet, Michael Rosen (as cited in Xerri, 2014), explains that when it comes to poetry in the classroom some teachers feel “nervous” or “inadequate” due to their childhood experiences: “a lot of poetry teaching leaves people with a sense of a series of mild

humiliations. There was a poem, there was a teacher and they felt they didn’t know enough; the teacher knew more” (p. 115). Some teachers’ sense of alienation from poetry and their ingrained beliefs

about how it should be approached in a lesson act as a stumbling block in the effort to engage as many students as possible with poetry writing.

All of the above seems to underscore the idea that in order for poetry writing to flourish in the English classroom, teachers need to be the vanguard of creative practice. However, this can only happen if they are provided with the means to critically reflect on their beliefs and practices and to position themselves as poets. Teacher education at both pre-service and in-service levels plays a crucial role in this regard.

## Creative practitioners

If we agree on the value of cultivating creativity in our English lessons, then we must identify how we may facilitate this as teachers. Hope (2010) maintains that “if we want to develop creative potential in schools, we must want the necessary structures and means for its development as much as we want the results. A number of major adjustments are required” (p. 39). We could argue that one of the most fundamental adjustments we need to make is for us to position ourselves as creative language teachers. This is because the cultivation of students’ creativity is to some extent dependent on teachers’ own efforts to engage in creative thinking and teaching: “creative teachers are such, precisely because they have made a conscious effort to be creative – they have, in other words, *decided to be creative*” (Pugliese, 2010, p. 15). Positioning oneself as a creative practitioner is no mean feat and teachers require plenty of support to do so effectively.

One means of developing teachers’ creativity is to target the relevant knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes in teacher training programmes. In fact, in order for trainee teachers to become creative practitioners, “...they need a secure pedagogical understanding and strong subject knowledge, supported by a passionate belief in the potential of creative teaching to engage and inspire hearts and minds” (Grainger, Barnes, & Scoffham, 2004, pp. 251–252). According to Stafford (2010), “valuable though it is for student-teachers to be given exciting ideas for the classroom, true creativity will only be achieved when they are empowered to think for themselves and generate their own innovations” (p. 42). An example of

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# Creative writing and ELT

this might consist of trainees taking the risk to adopt the guise of creative writers (Dymoke, 2011). Fitzgerald, Smith, and Monk (2012) affirm that “by participating in a creative writing experience, teachers not only open up new perspectives for their student-learners, but also for themselves” (p. 61). Encouraging prospective teachers to engage in such creative activities might help them to discover their own latent creativity and thus assume the stance of teachers who are willing to teach English in a creative fashion.

Enabling teachers to become creative practitioners might involve re-evaluating the learning objectives of current training programmes and supporting teacher trainers to design and develop creative curricula so that their students would be able to reap the benefits (Donnelly, 2004). For Cliff Hodges (2005), “teacher education...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 learning to teach” (p. 58). In fact, Stafford (2010) claims that “encouraging and facilitating critical and creative thinking by our student teachers defies ‘quick fix’ solutions, and indeed requires tutors to engage in some creative and collaborative thinking of their own” (p. 41). It is clear that just expecting teachers to teach English creatively by, for example, engaging their students in poetry writing is not sufficient unless the training programmes that roll them out are themselves an embodiment of creative teaching methods.

## Teacher training and positioning

Teachers’ attitudes towards poetry writing can affect the frequency of such an activity in class and the level of engagement expected of students. A US study by Blythe and Sweet (2005) shows that while expected to teach creative writing, English teachers are not formally trained in how to do so. This lack of training partly accounts for students’ writing remaining at novice level. It also accounts for “feelings of inadequacy” (Simmerman et al., 2012, p. 300) on the part of teachers. This is why Hennessy and Mannix McNamara (2012) note that “facilitating the development of an empowering teacher agency at pre-service level can, in no small part, encourage teachers to provide the space required for pupils to engage critically and creatively with poetry” (p. 391). In order to cultivate such creative spaces in the classroom,

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training at both pre-service and in-service levels needs to not only equip teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to teach poetry writing but also to supply them with opportunities to develop their own stance as poets.

The way teachers position themselves in the poetry classroom can have an impact on students’ attitude towards poetry writing. For Burkhardt (2006), those “teachers who share their own poetry with students, both early drafts and polished verses, provide powerful coaching” (p. 73). Teachers who do this kind of thing probably see creative writing as “an educational process that permits deeper engagement with the already written” (Knights & Thurgar-Dawson, 2006, p. 19). When teachers position themselves as poets, they are provided with deep insights into their students’ sentiments and lived experiences (Issitt & Issitt, 2010). Moreover, those teachers “who assume the identity of ‘writer’ and write alongside their students are likely to facilitate writing improvement in their students in terms of motivation and performance” (Locke, Whitehead, Dix, & Cawkwell, 2011, p. 277). Even when poetry writing is not part of the curriculum, teachers who choose to write poetry with students manage to boost their sense of engagement (Xerri, 2011). The need to ensure such outcomes underscores the significance of positioning oneself as a poet.

However, if teachers fail to reconceptualise their role *vis-à-vis* poetry, then poetry writing will remain at the periphery of what happens in class. Green (2009) argues that refraining from writing creatively “is likely to increase teachers’ sense of uncertainty and personal discomfort in teaching creative writing in a meaningful way” (p. 188). If poetry writing is perceived as a specialization that does not fall within the scope of English teachers’ interests and duties, then this activity is not going to have a chance of thriving in class. In the UK, for example, creative writing is most often associated with writers who visit schools to do

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workshops with students. Such residencies are to a large extent rewarding despite the fact that benefits are harder to achieve in secondary schools due to curricular and assessment pressures (Owen & Munden, 2010). However, for the National Association of Writers in

Education (NAWE), these residencies are truly successful when they act as a form of in-service education and training (INSET) for teachers and allow them to develop as writers. For NAWE (2010), “it is increasingly clear that creative writing is best nurtured in the classroom by teachers who are willing to engage with writing themselves – indeed who see themselves as practising writers.” Ings (2009) agrees with this and highlights “the importance of building teachers’ confidence” (p. 74) and of “developing teachers’ own practice as writers” (p. 75) through Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Teacher training plays a fundamental role in helping to nudge teachers into adopting the stance of poets. It is by positioning themselves in this way that teachers can be fully convinced of the necessity of engaging students in poetry writing.

## Conclusion

In order to motivate students to recurrently engage in poetry writing in the English lesson, teachers need to cultivate their own creative practices by stepping into the shoes of a poet rather than sending students to workshops run by established poets. This kind of positioning does not happen automatically and teachers require plenty of support in order for them to develop their beliefs and practices as well as build the necessary level of confidence. According to Hennessy and Mannix McNamara (2011), “the promotion of creativity and innovation within initial teacher education courses may be a significant first step” (p. 219). However, continued support throughout teachers’ careers is equally essential and this entails innovative forms of CPD that tap their creativity and foster a positive attitude towards the place of poetry writing in the classroom. By being spurred to position themselves as poets, teachers will be able to democratize poetry writing and allow as many students as possible to reap its benefits in the process of learning English.

## Author’s note:

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advantages of drama activities is that they recognize that the body is central to the learning process. He goes on to say,

“Classrooms on the whole are still places founded on the Cartesian idea that the brain and the body are two distinct entities; that the brain is the site of learning and that the body gets in the way of this by being prone to fidgeting, doodling, getting tired, and wanting to go to the toilet. Drama, on the other hand, seeks to channel and liberate the body’s energies through playful, physical activity and – particularly significant for second language learning – it foregrounds the communicative potential of bodies through their use of non-verbal, or ‘paralinguistic’ signs” (p. 4).

There is also general agreement amongst language teachers and researchers (Burke & O’Sullivan, 2002; Kao & O’Neill, 1998; Maley & Duff, 2005; Wagner, 1998) that drama helps learners by:

- contextualising language in purposeful and meaningful ways
- developing social interactions and group cohesion
- creating and encouraging a safe and generally positive classroom dynamic
- fostering motivation, self-awareness, confidence, and enthusiasm
- encouraging them to take more risks with language and flirt with fluency, which are considered vital to successful second language learning
- altering teacher-student relationships and interaction patterns in productive ways.

Such benefits underscore the value of drama activities in helping students achieve some of their communicative goals. Scholars, however, caution that drama in the second language classroom is not the language teaching approach, the ‘magic formula’ for language teaching and learning but, rather, that it should blend into and complement a broader, integrated approach to language teaching (Winston, 2012; Sam, 1990).

### **Star Taxi in the classroom**

*Star Taxi* is the story of a young man with dreams of stardom, who finds himself in Hollywood penniless and without friends. He is exploited by a small-time gangster who has a disturbing and overpowering

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### **About the Author**

Daniel Xerri teaches English language and literature at the University of Malta Junior College. A prolific researcher, he is the author of a number of academic publications, mostly on literature in language education and teachers’ professional development in ELT. In 2014, he was awarded a Research Mobility Programme Award by the World Universities Network to conduct research at the University of Sydney on creativity in English. Some of his talks and publications can be found at [www.danielxerri.com](http://www.danielxerri.com)

## **Creative writing and drama as ‘difference’ in the second language classroom**

**DAVID SANDBROOK**

*Using a short play, Star Taxi, to teach English, David Sandbrook argues for the richness of drama as a source of language input and as an engaging tool for guided speaking practice in an EFL classroom.*

### **Introduction**

This paper reports on a short drama, *Star Taxi* (Steckler & Franklyn, 2003), crafted especially for pre-intermediate level Japanese EFL learners as a rich source of language input and as an engaging tool for guided speaking practice in the EFL classroom. Drama, in this context, means “a way of infusing excitement into classroom exercises by combining dialogue and action” (Burke & O’Sullivan, 2002, p. xiv). First, I will situate drama as a viable tool for second language learning, before presenting three arguments that support *Star Taxi* as a creative and dynamic example of creative writing to use in the second language classroom, namely: 1) *Star Taxi* interests learners; 2) it is also an example of ‘creative writing’ that learners can understand and use meaningfully; and 3) it is easy to teach.

### **Drama in second language teaching and learning**

Toying with even the most basic of drama activities like ice-breakers and warm-up games can immediately bring ‘difference’ to any language classroom. Winston (2012) reminds us that one of the most significant