


# The Value of Creativity

Language Teachers as Creative Practitioners

A man in a blue suit and white shirt stands in front of a chalkboard. His head is replaced by a glowing lightbulb, symbolizing ideas and creativity. He is holding a pair of glasses in his hands.

**Daniel Xerri** explores the crucial role of creativity in English teaching, offering a survey of recent arguments about how best to nurture it in the classroom.

In the final plenary session at the IATEFL 2013 Conference, the Liverpool poet Roger McGough introduced two of his poems by briefly talking about children's conception of language. Before reading 'The Way Things Are' he confessed, 'I've always rather believed that all children are poets before they go to school...language is all very fresh to them.' For McGough this kind of fresh perception of language is gradually eroded as children grow older and that is why his poem serves as a reflection 'about how we want to educate our children.' 'On and On' builds on this idea and is meant to encourage the reader to contemplate 'the way children see language' and contrast it with how the older they get 'cliché folds into cliché.' By means of these poems, McGough challenged an audience of around 2,000 English teachers to consider how their stance as educators influences students' experience of language learning. In a way his thoughts and poems invited the audience to re-evaluate their approach to language teaching and to reflect on their priorities in the classroom. Do we teach English solely for utilitarian purposes or do we seek to safeguard the creativity that children seem to be inherently capable of? What is required for language teachers to teach creatively?

Creativity is perhaps one of the most exciting concepts that currently inform language pedagogy. There seems to be a tacit agreement amongst English teachers that we want to nurture our students' creativity in the classroom because we believe that in so doing their language learning experience will be more highly rewarding. We seem to believe that a student-centred classroom environment necessarily involves the cultivation of creative practices. In fact, 'Creativity is recognized as sometimes being a powerful motivating force for teachers and learners, and it can be a vehicle for high levels of individualized achievement' (Davies, 2006, pp. 52-53). Safford and Barrs (2007), for example, argue that school-based creative arts projects have a positive effect on children's language development. Creativity in the language lesson does not just entail students having fun by using their imagination. As Robinson (2011) points out, 'creativity is also about working in a highly focused way on ideas and projects, crafting them into their best forms and making critical judgements along the way about which work best and why' (p. 5). This means that the development of creativity should not be seen as a distraction from exam-oriented classroom activities but as a counterbalancing force that probably has an even bigger potential to stimulate student achievement.

**“The development of creativity should not be seen as a distraction from exam-oriented activities.”**

#### Threats to creativity

Despite being widely conceived of as a positive value, creativity in the language classroom is also threatened by a number of opposing factors. Unfortunately, some of these are constituted by certain beliefs held by a number of educators. For example, a study by Scott (1999) shows that teachers are prone to see creative children as being more disruptive. Associating creativity with

disruption obviously means that teachers are wary of cultivating students' creativity. Another common belief is that creativity is the preserve of people possessing an artistic temperament and that it cannot really be nurtured by means of education. However, Pugliese (2010) lambasts this view by saying that 'Creativity is a dynamic concept...it is not unique to certain gifted individuals, and it is not genetically learned' (p. 19). By encouraging teachers to deconstruct their beliefs about creativity there is a better chance of allowing it to prosper in their English lessons.

**“An assessment-driven curriculum that expects a standardised pedagogy risks pushing out creativity.”**

Another threat to creativity in language teaching is that posed by a curriculum driven by a completely opposite agenda. According to Hall and Thomson (2005) 'Standardised teaching, ruled by standardized outcome measures, and lessons parcelled into 10 and 20 minute blocks are unlikely to be the optimal conditions for promoting creativity in school' (p. 15). Dourneen (2010) is in full agreement with this idea and explains that 'The curriculum has been crowded with so much content that it is a challenge to plan lessons which enable pupils to be creative, to explore their own ideas and to be personally engaged' (p. 61). For Rinkevich (2011) 'The current emphasis on standardised testing and accountability has undoubtedly played a part in diminishing teacher and learner creativity' (p. 219). An assessment-driven curriculum that expects a standardised form of pedagogy on the part of English teachers risks pushing out creativity. It is probably for this reason that many of these teachers concur with the idea that 'the peripheral place afforded to the development of pupils' creative and affective sensibilities within the class is deeply disconcerting' (Hennessy and Mannix McNamara, 2011, p. 218). While teachers might be concerned about the effects of external forces on creative practices in the language classroom, it also true that they need to see themselves as agents of change and adopt a stance that is more conducive to the development of such practices.

#### Creative practitioners

If we agree on the value of cultivating creativity in our language 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 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 and 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 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 language in a creative fashion.

The act of 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 language creatively is not sufficient unless the training programmes that roll them out are themselves an embodiment of creative teaching methods.

**“Training programmes must themselves be an embodiment of creative teaching methods.”**

#### Conclusion

In order for students to engage in creative practices in the language lesson, teachers need to cultivate their own creativity. As discussed above, 'The promotion of creativity and innovation within initial teacher education courses may be a significant first step' (Hennessy and Mannix McNamara, 2011, p. 219). However, continued support throughout teachers' careers is equally essential and this entails innovative forms of CPD that tap their creativity and aim to develop a positive attitude towards its place in the language classroom. By being spurred to position themselves as creative practitioners, teachers will be more willing to put pressure on the powers that be so that the curriculum truly embraces the value of creativity in language teaching.

**“Teachers might be concerned about the effects of external forces on creative practices in the language classroom, but they also need to see themselves as agents of change.”**

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