

DEVELOPING CREATIVE THINKING SKILLS

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This article considers the importance of undergoing some focused training in developing creative thinking skills to enhance the potential of English language teaching professionals for dealing with the problems of daily teaching. The article also proposes new ways of making the approach to teaching more exciting and stimulating and the tasks of planning and lesson and materials design easier and more effective.

Key words: creativity, creative thinking skills, lesson and materials design, effective learning, teaching resources.

Creative thinking has been a recent concern among English language teaching professionals. This is very much in line with the move away from an over-reliance on methods and approaches as an answer to effective learning, and towards a focus on the mental processes that lead to more effective learning of languages as well as of content [1]. However, this attention has centred mostly on learners, with the very good argument that language acquisition can benefit from activities developing this aspect of higher order thinking, just as creativity itself benefits from language use and L2 learning opportunities [2]. Thus, the aim of the article is the analysis of the ways of developing creative thinking skills.

To begin with, it is necessary to point out that the lack of creative thinking skills in an educator needs immediate attention for many reasons, most of which are interdependent. In the absence of creative thinking, teachers:

- may be unable to develop flexibility in their thinking, think ‘on their feet’ and respond to the unpredictable and the unexpected, to deal with learner difficulties as they arise and to think of good solutions quickly;

- may be unable to do much more than follow a coursebook without appropriate changes to make the material more accessible to their learners;
- tend to become more and more dependent on the input and ideas of others – proponents of different approaches and methods, coursebook writers, teacher educators, article writers, and the authorities in general;
- may become completely unable to develop their own independent thinking, their own philosophy of education and, thus, unable to make their own decisions and solve problems in their own way;
- may adopt techniques and activities unthinkingly; an approach, method, or even the use of a book, may be ‘bought wholesale’ and often be used without reflection. If the result is not successful, it is quite difficult for the individual to understand why [2].

It has been suggested that creativity, or as it is also termed, divergent production, is not a single unifying ability; it is viewed as a composite of intellectual abilities [3]. Guilford further suggests that divergent production facilitates problem-solving, something which language teachers are faced with on a daily basis in their classes – and that we know enough about the creative process to be able to train individuals. Here are the four main characteristics of the creative process that he describes:

- producing lots of ideas (fluency);
- producing ideas of various types (flexibility);
- building on and embellishing existing ideas (elaboration);
- producing clever and original ideas (originality).

These abilities enable the individual to produce not only a multiplicity of answers as solutions to the same problem or tasks, but answers that are also varied; some may even be original.

Divergent production, then, seems to respond positively to some of the issues mentioned earlier:

- materials can be put to new use in more effective and stimulating ways;
- materials and lesson design becomes easier and more varied, as the teachers can come up with more than one solution to the problem of what to include at each stage;

- it is easier for teachers to see new ways of changing existing material to fit in with their aims, learners and teaching context;
- teachers produce more ideas, and some of them can also be quite original ones;
- teachers are no longer 'slaves' to one or another method but may be better able to evaluate, select and be eclectic in a principled way [2].

No one particular set of materials can always be appropriate to a single context unless they were written for that one particular context in mind. Even then the materials may well require some adjustment. This is because the learning needs of the students we teach and the teachers we train and work with are never static, they are constantly changing. It is up to the trainer / teacher to find the materials that suit their context or to adapt ones they have available.

Let us consider the reasons why you might need to adapt materials to your context. Here are some of the ideas: time factor (i.e. the materials will take too long); supporting equipment (i.e. don't have DVD players etc); administrative; the syllabus recommends / requires; sensitivity to cultural issues. Other reasons for adapting materials might be: the language is too difficult; terminology is used with which teachers are not familiar; there is not enough variety of activity types; the material is boring; the activities will be difficult as they are unfamiliar in terms of layout or type; they are not practical enough; the aim is not clear or does not fit with the overall aim of the training.

Once you have evaluated materials and decided that you need to adapt them it is then important to think about how you will do this. Here are some suggestions for adapting activities and tasks:

- Make it into a role play
- Brainstorm advantages and disadvantages
- Replace with a ranking activity on the main points
- Make it into a team quiz
- Simplify the language
- Replace with a jigsaw reading

- Use an information gap activity where each person has only one piece of information and they need to circulate to find others [4].

In addition, curating online and offline content is a stepping stone to creativity. Curation, which can be defined as the archiving and preservation of digital assets, is a new way of describing what teachers used to do in boxes and binders in the past. Creating original and 'clever' ideas is not the only expression of creativity. Creating something new as a result of changing or building on an existing idea has also given us many new works of art, new inventions, new content, new artefacts, new appliances, new technology, new tools. Curating and organising teaching resources created by others can be key in supporting the creation of original content. New ideas may sometimes originate in a flash of inspiration without previous knowledge or information, but that is not the usual way we create. There are many great tools on the web to help teachers collect and curate digital assets which in turn may inspire them to blog, write new material, design new lessons, and deal with classroom problems in a novel and more effective way. Some of the most popular include Diigo, Pinterest, and Scoop.it.

Social networking has a significant role to play in such quests; indeed, most of these tools are also social networking tools, encouraging users to share learning and collaborate and learn together. Facebook timelines and Twitter streams belonging to teachers have themselves become great sources of new content for teachers and teacher educators. Learning is, after all, social. We learn best in groups and creativity is often sparked off in the presence and company of others [2].

It is obvious that helping teachers to develop their ability to think creatively, including creative thinking skills training, is not going to be enough, and the effects of this training may not be sustainable unless there is a positive culture encouraging and facilitating as well as demonstrating creativity. Trainers need to model creative behaviours themselves by using a variety of ways of handling course input, from training games to loop input – an idea suggested by Woodward – not in a relentless pursuit of fun and games but in accordance with the topic and focus of each session [5]. In addition, work on team-building, generating trust among trainees, is essential

from day one and needs to be followed through systematically, either with activities such as those suggested by Hadfield [6], or with social activities in a school setting or a self-help group. Creativity needs to be inspired by inspiring leadership that nurtures and appreciates teachers who make the effort to be creative.

Clearly, the practical activities and techniques included here are based on the belief that it is possible to provide specific training activities that enhance divergent production in trainee teachers.

Let us consider the activities which promote fluency, flexibility, elaboration and originality that are necessary for the creative process.

- Activities promoting fluency

Brainstorming This is perhaps the most frequently used activity and will be familiar to all who are involved in teacher development programmes. The value of getting teachers in groups to brainstorm lots of ideas, focusing on quantity at the initial stage and quality later, when these ideas are discussed, evaluated and the most suitable ones chosen, is highly conducive to this aspect of divergent production.

- Activities promoting flexibility

Role plays With a group of colleagues, state a problem (e.g. My students don't do their homework) and take on different roles to discuss the situation – parents, director of studies, students and even minister of education! This activity is based on Edward de Bono's *Six Thinking Hats* [7], and actual coloured paper hats or badges representing different viewpoints or attitudes to the problem can be created by the trainer. In ELT, these viewpoints could be selected from among the many professional roles we are all aware of.

- Activities promoting elaboration / embellishing

Inserting activities Give trainees a coursebook page. They then start brainstorming as many activities as possible that can be added between activities in the unit. This may mean new activities or changing existing activities in some way. For example, instead of completing the usual gap-fills, the students can be asked to change the sentences and turn them into complete nonsense, or write similar sentences about classmates or famous people they know of.

- Activities promoting originality

Design activities are generally excellent as ways of helping develop original ideas.

Turning coursebook activities into games Ask the trainees to take an exercise from your coursebook and try to turn it into a game, e.g. The ‘sentences in a sentence’ completion exercise can be split into halves and used in a mingling activity.

Introducing an innovation into your teaching programme This is a more demanding activity involving discussion and decision-making, e.g. ‘How would you go about connecting your class with another class of learners in another country’ [2].

To sum up, this article is based on the firm belief that by undergoing some focused training in developing our own creative thinking skills, those of us involved in the teaching profession will enhance our potential for dealing with the problems of daily teaching and find new ways of making our approach to teaching more exciting and stimulating and the tasks of planning and lesson and materials design easier and more effective.

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