

Summary of YL SIG e-discussion on 'Creativity and teaching young learners'

The e-discussion, which took place in 2005 was led by **Lynne Cameron** who has also kindly provided this summary of the main points.

The e-discussion was supported with preparatory reading of a paper by **Lynne Cameron** available on:

<http://www.education.leeds.ac.uk/research/uploads/27.doc>

A shorter version of this paper can be found on page 9 of this issue of **CATS**.

Contributors to the discussion included Wendy Arnold (list moderator), Patricia B., Dilek Canavar, Helen Doron, Livia Faragó, Dennis Newson, Susan Hillyard, Ozbek Inan, Benniti Jen, Megan Roderick, Danae Seamann, Alexander Sokol, Sally Sonnex, Malgosia Tetiurka, Andrew Wright and Arnold Mühren.

1 What is creativity and what is it not?

Acts of creativity include:

- understanding old things in new ways
- and understanding new things in old ways
- taking risks and experimenting
- reaching into the imagination
- subverting the teacher's intentions or activity
- thinking as well as talking.

Creativity is

- purposeful
- relevant
- brave
- ordinary and everyday
- quiet as well as noisy
- (self) disciplined
- hard work
- open-ended
- sometimes spontaneous
- specific.

Creativity is not

- shoddy
- lazy
- easy.

2 Why is creativity difficult in schools?

Both children and teachers have creativity and imagination that they should be able to bring to the English language classroom but there are problems in fostering creativity:

- Children and teachers may have learnt that it is safer not to take risks.
- Passing examinations may be the key priority and that requires conformity not creativity.
- The school system may restrict and not allow

teachers to be creative.

- Parents, often paying for lessons, may not value creativity, because they did not experience it in their own education and because they want to be sure of good results. They are not willing to take risks with their children's learning.
- Although 'western' models of education may be highly valued, creativity does not often seem to be a part of those models (a paradox?).
- Teachers' experiences and views of language learning may not include creativity and risk taking.

3 What creativity can look like in the YL classroom

For students:

Subversions of classroom activities

- answering questions in unexpected ways: e.g. in surveys and in teacher-led talk - *X doesn't walk on the moon.*
- pushing the limits of convention e.g. *my pet is a snake*
- and (we should remember) it is also creative to avoid risks by 'playing safe'.

Noticing unexpected connections

- *alphabet letters on the classroom wall form the initials of a large bank*

Making up words that you need

- *hand socks for gloves*

For teachers:

Going with the flow

- Noticing and using students' unexpected or subversive contributions, e.g. a story about pets leads to talk about fantastic pets, then writing and drawing about them.

Going for quality not quantity

- using a limited set of materials but with lots of different activities

Leaving space for thinking and imagination

- not overwhelming students with materials and activities
- activities that do not have predictable outcomes e.g. *consequences*
- have students close their eyes and visualise while listening
- making drama scripts from stories and then acting them out with improvisation

Surprising students

- subvert familiar activities e.g. *talking about 'my family' from the perspective of a camel or a penguin.*
- use metaphor, e.g. *I feel tired – like a boat washed up from the sea*
- interrupting students practising prepared talks

Structuring opportunities for creative responses

- give a precise situation e.g. *write about what you hear when you shut your eyes in the playground.*

Teachers' creativity draws on expertise that comes from teaching many different types of students over the years and on ideas from outside the classroom.

Teachers can encourage creativity whether they have flamboyant, extrovert personalities or quieter, more reflective styles.

4 The discipline of creativity

4.1 The relationship between creativity, accuracy and memorizing

The goal of learning a language is to be able to use the language. On the way to that goal, there is vocabulary to be learnt and grammar to be mastered. Sometimes, the communicative goal gets hidden behind the high wall of examinations that need to be passed. Sometimes, the examination 'wall' is so high that the communicative goal disappears completely from view – for teachers, for parents, for learners.

If accuracy and correctness become the only measures of children's use of language, children learn that they must avoid mistakes and they stop taking risks. Using a language communicatively requires children to be confident to take risks with what they know:

- If we want to encourage creativity, we need to show children that we value it.
- There should be activities where risks are encouraged and lack of accuracy is not penalised if children take risks and stretch their language skills to the edge of their capabilities.
- It is important that children know what they are allowed and expected to do in any activity.

One of the outcomes of people's (understandable) reluctance to take risks is that memorizing becomes the favourite strategy for passing exams - children memorize lists of words, scripts for speaking tests, whole lessons or course book units:

- Memorizing in itself is not a bad thing! In fact, it is a very valuable strategy in language learning – anyone who is good at a foreign language has learnt many things by heart.
- **Memorizing without understanding** is a bad thing

because what is memorized is just a sequence of sounds or shapes, not English. It is likely to be a waste of time and effort. It does not help communication.

- Only memorizing is a bad thing because children learn that there is no space for imagination and creativity in language learning.
- Effective learning may come from memorizing **combined with** creativity – using what is known to communicate, through taking risks, experimenting and pushing language skills to the limit

4.2 Discipline, structure and creativity

Classrooms are not suitable places for children to do what they like; they are places for children to learn and to be excited by learning new knowledge and skills. They are also places where children can learn self-discipline and about their own creative potential.

Creative use of language often happens in structured situations – for example, the formal structure of poetry supports the creativity of poets, and a clearly structured classroom task can support imaginative responses from children.

Creativity is likely to develop in classroom activities with

- clear structures, goals and expectations
- encouragement and praise for bravery and risk taking
- guided self-evaluation by the learners of their participation.

Teachers who feel restricted by course book or curriculum could instead see these structures as a framework for creativity, just as the poet uses the framework of the poem structure (or the oyster inside its shell uses the grain of sand to build a pearl!).

In conclusion, adding creativity into the structure of the language classroom seems to offer:

- more interesting lessons for students and teachers
- more effective language learning
- and, in particular, increased confidence in speaking English.

Correction

The editors apologise for the inaccurate captions below the Brain Gym™ photographs in CATS Autumn 05. They should have read:

Page 7: Ronnie doing a Cross Crawl.

Page 8 Karen about to do a Lazy 8,

Adam sitting down doing a Hook-Up