



The Value of Creativity in English Language Education

We live in an age when the most valuable asset any economy can have is the ability to be creative – to spark and imagine new ideas, be they Broadway tunes, great books, iPads, or new cancer drugs.
(Thomas Friedman, 2010)

Both within the world of TESOL and without, the benefits of creativity and creative thinking have been recognized as essential for success (Bronson & Merryman, 2010; Craft, 2011; Cropley, 2008; Csikszentmihalyi & Wolfe, 2014; Richards & Cotterall, 2016). When President Obama put out the call to all Americans in his State of the Union Address in 2011, my own ears perked up, and I thought of my ESL college students who dream of working in the US after graduation. Obama said:

The first step in winning the future is encouraging American innovation. None of us can predict with certainty what the next big industry will be or where the new jobs will come from. Thirty years ago, we couldn't know that something called the Internet would lead to an economic revolution. What we can do—what America does better than anyone else—is spark the creativity and imagination of our people.

ESL educators are among those in many fields who are changing what and how they teach so that students can meet the demands of their future jobs as well as face the challenges of pressing social, economic, and environmental issues. This work will continue to be affected by advances in technology, science, and communication. It will require people to come up with new ideas and use and interpret information that we have yet even to conceive of (Friedman 2010; Goleman & Kaufman, 1992; Robinson, 1999; Sawyer, 2011). How can we prepare our students for tasks and skills that we have not even imagined yet? And what does this mean for our English language learners? What can

our language classrooms look like when we focus on developing creativity along with the other 21st-century skills our students need, not only for work, but for life? One answer comes from Erick Herrmann, who started his four-part series of articles on 21st-century thinking skills for English language learners in January 2015, providing some ways to incorporate creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication skills—the 4 Cs—effectively in the ESL classroom (P21 Partnership for 21st Century Learning, n.d.). Numerous interesting and useful resources such as these are available for teachers who want to incorporate creativity in their classes, and yet when we try them out, we may not be successful; they might seem extra, possibly fun, but not integral to our curricula because we do not see how they help us and our students meet our goals.

This theme section is an attempt to move beyond suggestions for sprinkling in creative activities here and there. Our hope is to provide a broader foundation and deeper understanding of creativity, expanding upon research and experiences from language education, augmenting it with psychology and art education, so that English language educators can more successfully engage in meaningful, creative teaching and learning. We are inspired by the recent work of sociolinguists such as Rodney H. Jones, who reminds us that creativity is inherent in language and “at the heart of all successful communication” (2016, p. 28). In addition, the collection of chapters in *Creativity in the English Language Classroom* (Maley & Peachey, 2015) demonstrates the potential in every language class, in all skills and types of activities, for students and teachers to cultivate their creativity. Other leaders in the field of TESOL, such as Jack Richards and Sara Cotterall (2016), agree, identifying key qualities and practices of creative teachers: They are knowledgeable, confident risk takers who are committed to their students’ learning, and they use a variety of innovative, motivating, student-centered methods. These are professional abilities that English language educators can practice and learn (Coffey & Leung, 2016; Constandinides, 2015). We hope to build upon these resources by illustrating more situations and examples of creative teaching in action, as well as providing strategies for developing as creative teachers.

The theme section begins with “The Creative Teacher: Learning From Psychology and Art Education to Develop Our Creative Processes in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages,” an article that elucidates research on creativity and applies it to teaching and learning English. It is based on the belief that teachers can better facilitate learning when they know how to identify, inspire, and assess creativity in themselves. Fortunately, all humans are inherently creative (Sawyer, 2013), and we can develop our own creative teaching skills,

learning how to use them in our classrooms in imaginative, innovative, and effective ways to motivate our students. This necessitates, for ESL teachers, active engagement in our own creative processes. The article outlines four stages of the creative process, as well as eight creative habits that we can practice to enhance our own creativity as teachers and see the work we do with our students as an art.

The following articles in this theme section cross national and cultural borders to focus more directly on students, how we can understand their different concepts of creativity, and how we can encourage them to apply their creativity in learning language. “Understanding Culturally Influenced Approaches to Creativity in an English for Art Purposes Program,” by Anne Connors, Jessica Gardner, Marifel Angeles, and Allison Payne, explores how Asian art and design students at an American university view creativity in making art and in learning English. The authors remind us that the better we understand our students’ perspectives, the better we can teach in ways that meet their needs while developing their creative thinking and guiding them in meeting academic and professional standards. Last, in “Designing an EFL Reading Program to Promote Literacy Skills, Critical Thinking, and Creativity,” Erica Ferrer and Kendra Staley detail an EFL reading program at their Colombian university that encourages students to think creatively and critically, collaborate, and develop the motivation to read both intensively and extensively. Their description provides a plan with examples and inspiration for English teachers and curriculum designers who want to integrate reading with other language and art skills, such as storytelling, poster making, and role-plays. In the end, their reading program shows us how much enjoyment teachers and students can have along with language development when we make time and space for students and teachers to be creative.

Guest Editor

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