

## APPROACHES TO TEACHING CREATIVE WRITING

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### Abstract

*The aim of this study deals with research we have conducted on teaching writing in the classroom. There are two main views upon teaching writing and developing writing skills: the writing process is seen more as a process; the traditional approach views teaching writing as a means and insists only upon its importance as a product. An Imaginative Approach to Teaching Writing is the first article that we have resorted to in our research, because it discusses the teacher's and the student's creativity. The most important ingredient in learning to write in a foreign language is motivation. The teachers who wrote the article have experimented with a wide range of interesting exercises, which could be very easily applied in the classroom. The second article we have based our research on, Writing at the Early Stages of Language Learning, approaches language learning through "free" or "uncontrolled" writing: the student alone produces the language that is to be taught, invents or builds sentences or paragraphs. We believe that these two articles share certain similarities: emphasis on the developing of students' creativity, increasing learner motivation, learning the language through writing and having fun. We believe that the students' creativity and having fun while learning are essential for the teaching-learning process.*

**Key words:** approaches, creative writing, methods, motivation, teaching

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### 1. Introduction

The following article deals with some research that I have done in the field of teaching writing in the classroom. In my research I came across two articles that I considered to be of importance in terms of developing writing skills by employing creativity. The two articles that I have chosen to speak about consist of approaches, methods and aims regarding the process of writing, as recent viewers see it more as a purpose, while traditional viewers on teaching writing considered it a means and insisted only in its importance as a product.

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## 2. An Imaginative Approach to Teaching Writing

*An Imaginative Approach to Teaching Writing* is the first article that got my attention, because it involves creativity from both the teacher and the student. The most important ingredient in learning to write in a foreign language is *motivation*, and the teachers that published the article have experimented with a wide range of exercises, which I consider to be very interesting and which could very easily be applied in the classroom.

The exercises have been devised to motivate the students and to use and improve their writing skills. Most of them are done in pair work or group work, which facilitates communication between the students. The exercises usually consist of two or three parts, so that they are not too long or boring. The students must do the first part well in order to accomplish the second. But what is more important of all is that they require the students to exercise their imagination. The exercises require the students to establish relationships between concepts, ideas, and words outside the normal use, which forces them to review their primary use. All these reasons can be summed up in one: the exercises are an *imaginative approach* to teaching varieties of writing. What follows next is a sampling of exercises, more precisely the two teachers insist on eleven types of exercises which require the students' imagination and creativity, but I have selected only seven of them, the ones that I have applied as a teacher, and would have loved to solve as a student.

### a. WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF ...?

*Preparation:* none;

*Organization:* individual/ pair work;

*Procedure:* tell the students to write a composition using one of the following ideas:

- .....if a crocodile came into the class to study English?
- ....if one day we found the streets of our city covered with grass?
- ....if I invited an extraterrestrial to have lunch at home?

Tell the students to invent new ideas if they don't like the ones you have given.

### b. COMPLETE THE POEM

*Preparation:* give the students the several first lines of a poem;

*Organization:* pair work;

*Procedure:*

*Step 1.* The students must choose one of the first lines and, using it, write a complete poem of whatever length they wish.

*Step 2.* The students read the poems aloud to the class, and then choose the best ones. You can display them on the wall.

c. RIDDLES

*Preparation:* none;

*Organization:* group work;

*Procedure:*

*Step 1.* Tell the students to write a riddle according to the following instructions: First define an object as if you were seeing it for the first time, and then describe the object by comparing it to something you know.

*Step 2.* When the students have written their riddles, they ask the rest of the class to guess what it is.

*Example:* *It has two circles with two eyes on them.*

*It looks like a bike. (Answer: a pair of glasses)*

d. CHANED NONSENSICAL STORIES

*Preparation:* prepare a list of questions with the verb tense that you want to practice on. For example:

*Who was he/she/it?*

*Where was he/she/it?*

*What was he/she/it?*

*What did he/she/it say?*

*What did say he/she/it to the people?*

*How did the story finish?*

*Organization:* group work;

*Procedure:*

*Step 1.* Have each student take a sheet of paper. Ask the questions listed above, one at a time. After the students have answered the first question, they should fold up their sheets of paper, so that the answer is hidden, and then pass their paper along to another student. Then, have them write the answer to the second question, and continue in this way until all the questions have been answered. Each student should answer the questions according to the original idea she/he had, when answering the first.

*Step 2.* Have each student unfold the sheet that she/he has at the end, and write a short story by joining the sentences into a paragraph (even though it apparently makes no sense) on a new sheet of paper.

*Step 3.* Have the students read the stories aloud and choose the funniest and most nonsensical one.

e. AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?

*Preparation:* none;

*Organization:* individual/pair work;

*Procedure:* Tell the students to think of well-known traditional stories (e. g. *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Little Red Riding Hood* etc.), and have them write a composition starting where the traditional story ended.

f. PICTURE COMPOSITION

*Preparation:* none;

*Organization:* pair work;

*Procedure:*

*Step 1.* Tell the students to draw a picture. Two students must draw on the same sheet, and neither of them has to take in account what the other has drawn.

*Step 2.* Each one must write a composition describing the final picture.

*Step 3.* They must discuss which composition better reflects their pictures, and explain why.

g. NEWSPAPER HEADLINES

*Preparation:* cut out some headlines from a newspaper and photocopy them;

*Organization:* group work;

*Procedure:*

*Step 1.* Hand out a photocopy to each group. The students must mix up the words in the headlines to make funny new headlines. They are acceptable if they are grammatically correct.

*Step 2.* After the students have written the new headlines, they must write a piece of news to go with one of them.

### **3. Writing at the Early Stages of Language Learning**

*Writing at the Early Stages of Language Learning* is the second article that I chose, because its purpose regards language learning through “free” or “uncontrolled” writing, in which the student composes in the English language – that is, invents or creates sentences, paragraphs or pages by himself. This does not mean he will be writing about complicated subjects; it merely means that given whatever stimulation, suggestion, motivation or assignment, the learner will be involved (intellectually and/or emotionally) and will do the composition by himself: it will be a subjective and creative activity.

Teachers tend to prefer controlled writing, because they have been brought up to appreciate the written page in a special way, which unlike speech, endures as lasting evidence. In this way, teachers have come to consider written errors more seriously than oral ones. The visible error seems so much more serious than the invisible one, that even a teacher who sees the value of overlooking errors in favor of communication in a student’s speech, often fails to apply such flexibility in relation to students’ writing. The advantages of “free” writing are both psychological and practical. From the very beginning the learner gets used to the idea that, like his first language, the second language is creative, varied, and personal. It can be used to express his realities, perceptions, and points of view, even if at a very simple and descriptive level. By comparing his writing with that of the others he becomes increasingly aware that there is rarely just one way to say something.

Moreover, when he experiments with the language, he is intellectually involved in the process of his own learning. Since he knows what he is trying to say, feedback from classmates and teacher tells him how successful he has been. In other words, students learn by writing instead of waiting until they have learnt to write. Some problems may occur when writing takes place as part of the exploration stage of the learning process. Many teachers maintain that breakdowns usually occur when students try to reproduce L1 in L2, so they avoid assigning free writing, because the risk is that students will produce something that is incomprehensible for someone who does not know

the first as well as the second language. The risks may be a complete breakdown in communication or moments of frustration and discouragement. Although we may believe that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, and therefore the risks are worth taking, many teachers still prefer tight control through “guided” or “controlled” writing.

#### **4. Better Ways to the Teaching of Personal Writing**

Another article that got my attention – *Better Ways to the Teaching of Personal Writing* (Shirleen, 2002) – regards the employing of “personal writing” as a means of stimulating and helping students in their goal of achieving the productive skill of writing. In this article, a research was undertaken in order to explore what methods can be used to improve the teaching of writing in secondary schools. There are many creative ways of teaching personal writing that can make students enjoy writing, want to write, find writing meaningful, thus leading to an improved quality in their writing. The methods reported on here challenge teachers to be innovative and creative.

##### *a. Stimulated writing*

Stimuli in the form of music, pictures and film can motivate students to write. In the opinion of Castillo and Hillman, “listening to music without lyrics allows students to use their imagination”. The teacher selects a piece of music, plays it to the students and asks them to write whatever feelings or thoughts the music arouses in them. A similar method can be used with pictures taken from magazines, newspapers, books etc. This method not only encouraged writing, but also listening, speaking and reading.

##### *b. Writers’ workshops*

Writers’ workshops promote safe atmospheres for writing and let students know that their writing is important. The emphasis is on writing freely, creatively, and using the imagination and personal experiences. While organizing such workshops is time-consuming, they are worthwhile.

##### *c. Using models*

Showing students models of good writing gives them an idea of what to aim for. In addition to the model, teachers can give students a writing strategy worksheet designed to guide students as they write. This requires a good deal of work on the teacher’s part but, once done, such worksheets and models can be re-used.

*d. Pen friend letters*

Some teachers may be able to organize pen friend exchanges for their students. The truth is that the more students exchange letters, the more their writing improves. Such a real life situation can motivate students as it is meaningful communication.

*e. Free Writing*

In this method, students are asked to write freely on a topic determined by the class or the teacher. According to Jacobs (1986), free writing focuses on content, does not worry about the form and is a ceaseless process. With the worry of making errors removed (the work is not graded), students can focus entirely on getting their ideas on paper. Since personal writing depends largely on students' imagination and creativity, free writing is a good platform that can be used to enthuse students to write.

*f. Journals*

Like free writing, journal writing is ungraded, allowing students to focus on expressing their thoughts and feelings rather than on accuracy and structure. This method can and should be used in combination with another one:

*g. Publication of students' work.*

Students' work can be published in the school magazine, in a newsletter, on the notice board. Having their work published is an incentive, and shows that the work is appreciated and valued. Talented artists can be asked to illustrate the work.

*h. Process writing*

Many teachers pay little attention to the process of writing. The emphasis on the product ignores the fact that composing is a process of thinking, exploration and revision. In some types of writing assignments, however, teachers could treat their students' writing as a first draft and encourage them to edit and revise, following the teacher's text-specific suggestions regarding organization, content and style. Peer editing can also be done. Once the students are satisfied they have revised their work as well as they are able, the work can be collected again for marking.

## **5. Fiction writing method**

*a. Showing versus telling*

Discussion topic: Ask the class how an author can show that *John is sad*, that *Elena is nervous*, that *Johnny is angry* without saying, "*John is sad*", "*Elena is nervous*", "*Johnny is angry*". The

teacher assigns them to work in groups that should come up with ten things that people they know do when sad, nervous, or angry. Encourage them to think beyond the obvious.

Creative writing game: "*Your character has a secret*". The teacher gives each student a sheet of paper with a different statement about a fictional character; for example:

- Mayra can't cook.
- Joel cheated on the test.
- Karin hates Mary.
- Peter is afraid of his boss.
- Elena is jealous of her sister.
- Chris just kissed Johnny's girlfriend.

The students have five minutes to write some sentences that show the information they've been given without telling it. Then they pair up to read their partners' sentences and guess the secret.

*b. 'It was a dark and stormy night and...'*

The activity should work at most levels above elementary, as long as the students have some knowledge of past tenses, but it works best when they also know past continuous/ progressive too. All that is needed to get started is a sheet of plain paper for each pair of students (Table 1).

*c. If I were, if you were ...*

First the teacher makes copies of this outline:

*If I were a fruit, I would be ....*

*If I were a vegetable, I would be ...*

*If I were a tree, I would be...*

*If I were a flower, I would be...*

*If I were a fish, I would be...*

*If I were a bird, I would be...*

*If I were a book, I would be...*

*If I were a song, I would be...*

*If I were the weather, I would be...*

*If I were a season, I would be...*



**Table 1.** *The stages of a lesson in teaching writing*

Stages	Activities
<i>The listening part comes first</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask the students to draw the face of a person in the top right-hand corner of the page.</li> <li>• Once they've done this ask them to give the person a name.</li> <li>• Then on the top left of the page ask them to write five adjectives to describe the person's appearance.</li> <li>• Next ask them to write five more adjectives to describe the person's character.</li> <li>• After they've done this ask the students to write three things that the person likes doing.</li> <li>• Then ask them to write who the person lives with.</li> </ul> <p>In this way they build up a character profile for the person they are going to write about.</p>
<i>The writing part</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Now dictate the following sentence to your students: <i>'It was a dark and stormy night and...'</i>. Stop at this point and ask them to write in the name of the person they have drawn and followed by the word <i>'was'</i>.</li> <li>• Then ask the students to complete the sentence from their imagination and add one more sentence.</li> <li>• Once all the students have added a sentence to their stories, get them to stop and pass the paper to the pair on their right (this means that every pair of students now has a new character).</li> <li>• The students then read through the information and the beginning of the story and then add one more sentence to it.</li> <li>• Once they've done this you ask them once more to pass the paper to the next pair on their right. Continue to do this with each pair of students adding a sentence to each story, gradually building up each story as the papers are passed around the class.</li> <li>• Continue with this until you decide that the students are starting to lose interest or have written enough and then tell them to finish the story.</li> </ul>
<i>Follow up</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Once all the stories are complete there are a number of follow-up options that the teacher can try.</li> <li>• Put the stories up around the class and get the students to read them all and decide which is best.</li> <li>• Give each pair of students a story and get them to try to find and correct errors.</li> <li>• Get the students to write the stories up on a computer and then ask them to add more description and detail to the stories.</li> </ul>

Then the teacher distributes the sheets that he has prepared. The students are asked to work individually for about 10 minutes, completing the outline of the poem with words they prefer. For example: *If I were a fruit, I would be a grape.*

- Let students share what they have written in groups of four. Then conduct a class discussion and go through the poems line-by-line, asking for examples of what they have written.

- Ask students to think of someone they like and to write the person's name as the title of their poem. They then write a 12-line poem addressed to that person using the following format:

*Line 1:* describe the person as a kind of food.

*Line 2:* describe the person as weather.

*Line 3:* describe the person as a tree.

*Line 4:* describe the person as a time of day.

*Line 5:* describe the person as some kind of transport.

*Line 6:* describe the person as an article of clothing.

*Line 7:* describe the person as part of a house.

*Line 8:* describe the person as a flower.

*Line 9:* describe the person as a kind of music/a sound.

*Line 10:* describe the person as something to do with colour.

*Line 11:* describe the person as an animal.

The last line should be the same for everyone: '*You are my friend*'. So, their poem would look something like this:

***For Mary***

*You are mango ice-cream*

*You are a cool breeze on a hot day*

*You are a shady coconut palm*

*You are dawn*

*You are a sailing boat crossing the bay*

*You are my comfortable sandals*

*You are the sunny verandah*

*You are jasmine*

*You are a soft gamelan*

*You are light blue*

*You are a playful kitten*

*You are my friend.*

The dramatic increase in self-confidence and self-esteem which creative writing tends to develop among learners leads to a corresponding increase in motivation. Much of the teaching we do draws and focuses on the left side of the brain, where our logical faculties are said to reside. Creative writing puts the emphasis on the right side of the brain, with a focus on feelings, physical sensations, intuition, and the like. This is a healthy restoration of balance between the logical and the intuitive faculties.

## **Conclusions**

In my opinion, these three articles come to share similarities through the fact that they emphasize on developing students' creativity, which determines him/her to become more motivated, and thus learn the language by having fun. According to all the three articles, the teacher's role is that of organizer and facilitator, as opposed to the teacher-centered activities where the teacher's role is that of controller. These methods represent good means of enthusing students who are on the path of learning to write. With a variety of methods and an enthusiastic teacher, children can become competent and creative members of a literate society.

As I have already mentioned, the opinions reflected in these articles appeal to me, and I am in favor of encouraging students to learn through creativity, either by making use of "free" writing, or by selecting such creative and motivational exercises as the ones previously presented. It seems that the aim in writing these articles was to provide a variety of simple resources to English teachers, who consider their students' creativity very important. Since writing has always been considered the most difficult skill for students to develop, I consider that these approaches are a way of enjoying their own compositions, while having fun at the same time.

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