

# In the Classroom

## Creativity Through Drama in Language Learning

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### Abstract

*This paper will argue that drama techniques can provide an excellent framework for developing students' creative thinking. The first part of the paper will attempt to define what is meant by creativity in educational settings through discussion of the work of psychologists Kaufman, Beghetto, and Sternberg. It will focus specifically on the difference between BIG 'C' legendary creativity and little 'c' everyday creativity and how little 'c' creativity relates to discourse in the language classroom. Next, the author will discuss how some of the activities in the Torrance test of creativity (1996) share striking similarities with drama techniques. Lastly, some of these drama techniques will be briefly introduced in the final part of the paper.*

### Introduction

**T**he role of creativity in education has recently been receiving considerable attention. Research in educational settings has mainly been carried out by psychologists interested in creativity (Kaufman, Beghetto,

and Sternberg). Research has focused rather broadly on ‘education’, particularly in elementary school settings with little work focusing on the interrelation of creativity and EFL. Within the field of applied linguistics, studies have focused on the creativity of language rather than the application of creative thinking to English language teaching [and learning?]. Studies have included the creative nature of everyday talk (Carter, 2004), creativity in children's language play (Cook, 2000), and also the literary-like uses of language in advertising and internet communications (Crystal, 2001). The research so far has thrown up some interesting insights into the creativity of language, but as yet there is a dearth of information on how these discoveries could be translated into the language classroom (Smith & Smith, 2010, p.251). This short paper, by suggesting how drama techniques can improve students’ creative thinking, is intended as a call for further research in this neglected area.

## What is Creativity and Why is it Important?

Any discussion of creativity must initially attempt to clarify what creativity means in an educational setting. For many people creativity is associated with the words imagination, ingenuity, innovation, inspiration, inventiveness, muse, novelty, originality, serendipity, talent, and unique (Plucker & Makel, 2010, p.48). It is often thought of as a skill which one either has or does not have. In this sense, it is associated with highly artistic innovations and discoveries –something intrinsically unique. This definition of creativity is what is referred to as BIG ‘C’ creativity. Within educational settings a distinction is made between ‘BIG C’ and ‘little c’ creativity (Craft, Jeffrey & Leibling, 2001). BIG ‘C’ creativity is the creativity that most people think of: the world changing ideas, artistic creations and dynamic inventions of an elite, eminent few. Little ‘c’ creativity relates to the more prosaic discoveries and explorations in the world of music, art, industry, technology and all forms of discourse. The elements of conversation that mark us out as interesting, friendly, eager to interact with our fellow language partner all come under the umbrella of little ‘c’ creativity. It is this little ‘c’ creativity that is most evident in everyday discourse and the type of creativity that language teachers need to develop in their classrooms.

So what is the definition of this little ‘c’ version of creativity? The psychologists Kaufman and Sternberg (2010, p. xiii) define creativity as: 1. something new, different, innovative, 2. of high quality, and 3. appropriate. Creativity has also been defined as something that entails change or transformation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 28) and something that creates the *need* to make, create, imagine, produce, or design anew (Feldhusen, 2006, p, 137) (Italics added). From these definitions some conclusions can be made. Creativity means producing something new, something for which a need exists, and something deemed appropriate. It also needs to have merit in terms of quality and expertise. Kaufman and Beghetto (2009) extend the BIG ‘C’, little ‘c’ theory further to talk about four levels of creativity, Beghetto uses the analogy of a jazz pianist to illustrate the distinctions:

1. Big C – legendary creativity, ex. Fats Waller
2. Pro C – professional creativity, ex. Professional jazz pianist
3. Little c – everyday creativity, ex. Accomplished amateur jazz pianist
4. Mini c – interpretive creativity, ex. Young player just discovering jazz riffs

(Adapted from Beghetto, 2010, p. 455-456)

This theory is very useful for language teachers as it provides a very basic kind of road map to build students’ creative thinking from mini c to Pro C level. In light of these insights it is possible to view creativity not as a kind of on/off switch: people are either creative or they are not, but as a continuum scale: people are all at some point on the creativity scale from mini ‘c’ to Big ‘C’. Accordingly, teachers can reject the idea of creativity as a kind of divine gift and accept the verity of it as an innate skill that all possess. Once creativity is viewed as a universal skill, students’ abilities can be developed through specific activities and

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consciousness raising techniques. Many researchers, including Chomsky, regard creativity as more than just language being used in imaginative or poetic ways; they considered it a central part of the language system. It is people's innate programming to recognize, produce and process creativity that allows them to immediately understand the true meaning of their interlocutor's original utterances (Chomsky, 1964, p. 7). Consider the following example from Carter:

Extract: members of a family are preparing food for a party:

C: Foreign body in here. What is it?

B: It's raisins and (inaudible)

C: Er oh it's rice with raisins is it?

D: No no no. It's supposed to be [laughter] erm

C: There must be a raisin for it being in there

(Adapted from Carter, 2004, p.93)

It is a sense of universal creativity that allows readers to recognize the word play in Cs last contribution. Readers simultaneously, register the connection between 'reason' and 'raisin', understand that this is intentional and not a slip of tongue and recognize that it is an example of creative, humorous wordplay. All this even though it is may well be the first time that they have encountered this novel use of language. Carter recasts Chomsky's theory of the creative nature of language as "creativity is a pervasive feature of spoken language exchanges as well as a key component in interpersonal communication, and ... it is a property actively possessed by all speakers and listeners; it is not simply the domain of a few creatively gifted individuals" (2004:6). In this sense, creativity is essential for how people both produce and process language.

It has been argued that there are now two models of creativity: creativity for personal growth and cultural awareness, and creativity for the knowledge economy and employment (Pope & Swann, 2011) There have been concerns raised that the latter, somewhat capitalist-driven version, is gaining too much attention and that teachers should be encouraging creativity for personal growth as opposed to creativity for financial gain (O'Connor, 2007: 53-4). Nevertheless, leading educationists believe that such a view of creativity is essential if teachers are to equip students to succeed in modern work environments. There have even been calls for creativity to be added to the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Robinson, 2011). Whether this economically driven justification for creative development assists students' language acquisition needs further inquiry and teachers must ask themselves if these materialistic motivational sources are sufficient to aid language learning. The next section will look at how drama techniques complement the main elements of creative thinking and how they can be employed to facilitate transitions from Mini 'c' to Pro 'c' creativity.

## How Can Drama Techniques Aid the Acquisition of Creativity?

Before a discussion of how drama techniques can help with the acquisition of creativity, it may be useful to review what is meant by the term 'drama techniques' (hereafter DTs). DTs are different from drama in that they are based on activities that were developed in the theater to help actors gain deeper understanding of character, situation, and background of the scene. These activities have been selected and/or adapted for use in the language classroom. DTs often revolve around some conflict or tension that must be resolved. How the problem will be resolved is up to the participants—any one stimulus will have multiple solutions. DTs then offer students a heuristic learning experience;

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It is important to note that DTs differ considerably from the role-plays that are often taught in the language classroom. Traditional classroom role-plays such as buying a hamburger at a fast food restaurant often have more features of formal discourse than informal ones. For example: predetermined formulaic language, turns which are clearly assigned, a discourse which often sticks to just one topic, and unnatural language exchanges. This type of role-play contains nothing of the unpredictability of everyday language. This checklist of the features of formal speaking from Nation and Newton provides startling similarities with textbook role-plays:

- 1 It is transactional. That is, its purpose is to communicate information rather than maintain social contact.
- 2 It involves a long turn.
- 3 It is influenced by written language.
- 4 The speaking is done ...in a clear and deliberate way with opportunity for the speaker to monitor the production.
- 5 It often needs teaching as it is a skill that is not part of typical language use.

(Nation and Newton, 2009, p. 122)

Drama techniques on the other hand involve the assimilation of ideas into an interpretation or rewriting of a 'text', which could be anything from a poem, a photo, newspaper article, and does not have to restrict itself to the written word.

The Torrance test of creativity (Torrance, 1966) is still one of the most common assessments of creativity. A close look at some of the tasks in the Torrance test of creative thinking reveal that many of the tasks are surprising similar to the theatre games and drama techniques devised by the like of Viola Spolin (1986) and Maley and Duff (2005). For example, categories of the Torrance test include asking, product improvement, unusual uses, and 'just suppose': these all require divergent thinking areas of fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration. Specifically, the unusual uses part of the test is almost identical to a theatre game included in Swale's *Drama Games* (2009, p. 136).

Another rationale for using DTs in the language classroom is how they can be utilized to foster creative, cognitive function. Acquiring more knowledge about the rules of language can enable more creative thought, and thinking creatively can help students to make new linguistic connections and test out their theories of language like the 'raisin- reason' example above. It can be seen, therefore, that learning and creativity are synergic. It has been argued that one of the main factors that inhibit creativity in the classroom is the predominance of IRE: initiate, respond, evaluate also sometimes referred to as IRR: initiate, reply, and respond. Within this framework students soon learn that their role is to answer or respond to the teacher's utterance, which the teacher will follow up by telling the students that their response is correct, acceptable or otherwise. It becomes a kind of intellectual hide and seek, the students must guess what the teacher perceives to be the correct answer (Beghetto, 2010, p.450). This means students have few opportunities to explore or express their own ideas, theories, and interpretations of language. Drama techniques on the other hand positively encourage the unexpected.

Sternberg's investment theory of creativity (2006) states that creativity is a decision-making process a decision to generate ideas, a decision to choose the most appropriate choice, and a decision to persuade others that this is the best choice. Importantly, he stresses that it is not enough to have the skill; it is imperative that students make the decision to use the skill (Sternberg, 2006, p. 90). This is where DTs can be utilized; by nature they give students opportunities to make proactive choices and exploit their abilities. Additionally, Sternberg's cycle of 'generate, choose and persuade' are all employed in drama techniques. The students generate a number of possible solutions to a problem, they then choose the most appropriate and interesting in terms of uniqueness and quality, lastly through their interpretation they must persuade their audience real or imagined of the validity of their choices.

From the teacher's point of reference, DTs also comply with Torrance's three stage incubation model of teaching (1993): stage 1. heightening expectations and motivation, stage 2. deepening expectations or digging

deeper, and stage 3. going beyond or keeping it going. In stage 1 the teacher attracts the students' motivation by introducing the stimulus, in stage 2 student expectations are deepened through their own explorations, and in stage 3 the students' expectations are kept going through feedback and reflection sessions.

## **Some Examples of Drama Techniques to Foster Creativity**

Nearly all drama games and techniques can be used to develop creativity but some good starting points include conflict role-plays, stories from pictures, mimes and tableaux, and developing skits from dialogue snippets, all described below.

### ***Conflict Role-plays***

In conflict role-plays students are given the beginning of a scene which features conflict or tension. They must resolve the conflict in any way that they deem fitting. One good example is:

*You are travelling in a strange country with your friends. Your car has broken down at night on a lonely desert road. Another car stops. A man gets out. He has a gun.*

(Maley & Duff, 2005, p. 216)

Students are free to continue and resolve the scenario in any way they choose. For example, when the author's students worked on this scenario, endings varied from outsmarting the gunman, discovering the gunman is in fact a long lost friend, discovering the gunman is a 'good' escaped prisoner, and recasting the gunman as a Resident Evil-style zombie killer!

### ***Stories from Pictures***

Students are given some random pictures from which they must create a story in the form of a role-play or oral narrative. Here is a good example adapted from Lindstromberg:

*Give each group of students four pictures: a location, a man, a woman, and an object. The group must act out a scene incorporating all four pictures.*

(Adapted from Lindstromberg, 2004, p. 72)

Allowing students to select the pictures themselves enhances their creative output. This activity is also very similar to that of Sternberg's creativity test in the Rainbow Project. (Sternberg & The Rainbow Project Collaborators, 2006)

### ***Mimes and Tableaux***

Mime and tableaux are powerful tools to develop creativity; creating mimes and tableaux from poems, short stories, pictures or songs and vice versa is a fulfilling, creative activity. Any text can be used as a stimulus: a short story, a poem, song lyrics, and also visual and aural texts such as photos, pictures, advertisements, or pieces of atmospheric music. Students then use these stimuli to develop mimes or tableaux. This can also work the other way with students' mimes and tableaux acting as the catalyst for other groups to create written responses in the form of poems, short prose pieces, or montages.

### ***Developing Drama Skits from Dialogue Snippets***

Another way to develop students' creativity through drama techniques is to provide students with brief snippets of dialogue. Students use these snippets as the stimulus for a role-play. The dialogue may be featured at the beginning or any other point in the role-play. Here are some examples from Maley and Duff (2005):

- 1.A: Can you see?  
B: No, where are they?  
A: Look over there, behind that tree.  
B: Wow! That's really interesting!
- 2.A: How long?  
B: I'm not sure...  
A: But I need to know.  
B: Come back later then.
- 3.A: Please tell me.  
B: What can I tell you?  
A: You know what I mean.  
B: How CAN I tell you that?
- 4.A: Who did this?  
B: I'm not sure.  
A: But you must know. You were here all the time.  
B: I'm sorry...I can't... it's a secret.

(Maley & Duff, 2005, p. 208)

It should be apparent from these few examples that drama techniques act as stimuli for students' creative thinking and interpretations. They function as the starting points from which students may depart to multiple potential end points.

## Conclusion

This paper has briefly addressed various issues pertaining to building creativity through drama techniques. A number of people from educators to psychologists have stressed the importance of creativity in the modern workplace. Other linguists have argued that creativity is a universal language skill that needs more attention in the language classroom. As Robinson puts it, teachers are educating students to enter a work environment that they can only begin to imagine. Current jobs such as web designer, app developer, advertising on social media networks were unimaginable 20 years ago. If students are to thrive in unforeseen job markets in 20 years' time, then teachers need to hone their creativity and ability to adapt to new situations. DTs are an excellent method to develop creative thought processes; however more teachers need to be willing to apply the results of current research to the language classroom and more specific research is needed to explore the role of creative thought in language learning.

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