

6

Dear Silvia,

Here is a piece for **Babylonia**, which I hope is more or less right for you. I am delighted to write for a editor I have met, however briefly. Our talk in Milan is still with me.

Mario ( that Rinvo one)

### **Creativity in EFL Exercise Making**

Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims, UK

Books of practical lesson plans, Teachers Resource Books, are quite extra-ordinary texts. The sentences that sit on the page are, at best, clear, sparse and to-the-point, while at worst they are repetitive, confusing and turgid. Have you ever tried to read such a book for a couple of hours? Grim. These are not books to read through at a sitting.

And yet they are extra-ordinary texts. Extraordinary because half a page of any such book can provide the seed from which a teacher grows a shape within which students come to life and thrill themselves with their own energy and creativity. In a way you might think of these books as packets of seed or bags of bulbs. You would hardly expect a tulip bulb to, itself, be gorgeous with reds, and pinks and yellows. It simply holds the promise of those colours in the way a page in a Teachers Resource Book may hold the promise of interesting social interaction with a strong language learning or language practice side to it

### **Teacher Creativity**

And such books are extra-ordinary texts because they give rise to so much creativity. Let's look at some of the ways this will sometimes flow;

- *The teacher reads an exercise on the page and is reminded of an activity she used to do but has half-forgotten about. She ends up doing an amalgam of the two exercises, thus effectively creating a third.*
- *The teacher mis-reads the exercise and so spawns a new one. This happens more often than one might think. While collaborating on writing a book, I have often goofily mis-read my colleague's work and sometimes produced a mess, but sometimes something better than they intended*
- *The teacher reads the exercise accurately, thinks about this particular class, their level and their mood, and decides to modify the exercise with a view to making it fit into her mapping of the group.*
- *The teacher reads the exercise, does it with her class, and, in the light of how she feels it went, changes it in some way before use with other students.*
- *The teacher does an exercise chosen from a book and finds that a couple of her*

*students understand her instructions differently from the way the majority do. After some initial puzzlement, she realises that they have invented a new exercise, a better one, maybe.*

- *The teacher overhears another teacher in the staffroom talking about an exercise she has just done with a group. She thinks: "might try that..." and then goes and does it.*

The above are examples of everyday creativity of the sort that is going all over the world as you read this piece, among the 5 million+ of us who teach EFL. A few of these new exercises may go into print in teachers' magazines or on the Web, but mostly they will circulate among the person's professional peer-group. Some may travel further afield if the teacher in question shares them at a conference presentation.

(I can hear you objecting to my figure of 5 million "creative" EFL teachers.....sure the ones who care enough about their job to really give to it are probably a minority of the 5 million..... but that still means a huge amount of unsung creation is going on in EFL each and every day.)

### **Methodologist Creativity**

There are some teachers and teacher trainers who also see themselves as activity innovators..... they are the people who have written the three to four hundred Teacher Resource Books that have come out over the past thirty years. Conspicuous examples would be Alan Maley and Alan Duff, the fathers of this EFL genre. There are also some coursebook writers who see exercise innovation as part of their remit, to wit Robert O'Neill in the 70's with **Kernel Intermediate**, Catherine Walters and Michael Swan in the 80's with **The Cambridge English Course**, and in the 90's the Soars with **Headway**.

What many of these people have done is to go to other fields, outside ELT, in search of techniques and ideas that they can bring back and modify to be of use in our classrooms. A classic example of this process is Maley and Duff's trawl through actor training techniques which led to them writing **Drama Techniques in Language Learning** that came out with Cambridge in 1979.

What I would like to do in the rest of this article is to show you how searching outside can lead to rich hauls of ideas that are very useable in the language classroom. What follows are a series of ideas I have recently come across and which, as far as I know, have not yet been "domesticated" into an EFL frame. In each case I will suggest ways in which this "domestication" might usefully happen. You may decide to go off and domesticate these techniques in your own classrooms.

### **Some ideas that are, I believe, new to EFL**

1.

#### **The Equilateral Triangle**

Three days into an intensive Neuro-Linguistic-Programming Course people take 15 minutes to think about and then write about the person they think they are most similar to in the group and the person they are most different from.

Everybody then gets up and moves around the room, keeping equidistant from the "same person" and the "different person".

They then sit down again and write a page about the experience of "being between" the two extreme-for-them people in the group.

### *Appreciation*

I do not know why, but this exercise thrilled me when I heard about it a week ago, and thrills me now as I tell you about it.

### *EFL Adaptations*

- A. Do the exercise just as described above. It stands as an introspective writing exercise, and we need many more of these. Tell the students that they should write in English, but that no one will read what they write apart from them.
- B. Ask the students to mill round the room and to find out what other people's four favourite TV programmes are. Do a second round on cinema films.

Ask them to write down the name of the person with the closest TV and film taste to them and the person from whose taste they feel most distant.

Now tell them to move slowly round the room keeping equidistant from the two "polar" people.

Ask them to each write you a three paragraph letter, explaining what they liked about the exercise and what they disliked.

In your next class, respond to what they write with a "Dear Everybody" letter, a copy of which you give to everybody.

(Does this adaptation weaken the power of the original activity, by starting with a verbal exchange of information?)

### *Acknowledgement*

Thank you, Judy Baker, for giving me a clear account of this bit of your NLP course.

## **2. Letter to a person outside the Group**

My colleague, Tania Lewis, tells me she has asked her immigrant students to write short letters to each other across the class. This activity, at lower intermediate level, typically has students receiving and replying to half a dozen letters in a period of about 30 minutes. Brilliant free, person-focused writing practice.

One of Tania's students seemingly misunderstood her instruction, and decided to write a letter to her husband who was not present in the group..

### *Appreciation*

Inadequate instructions can lead to discoveries.

### *Adaptation*

Ask each student to write a letter to some one s/he knows outside the group, the contents of which s/he is willing to share with another person in the class.

Once the letters have been written, ask the students to get up and walk round the room. They pick a partner during the walking process and sit down together.

They read each other the letters they have written, and explain the context.

( This is a rich and complex, multiple-addressee writing task, as the writer is communicating both to the outside addressee and to possible members of the group.)

## 3.

### **Reading Exercises**

Here are a set of exercises, which I learnt at an ARELS session in Nov, 2002, which Catherine Walters proposed not as EFL exercises but as instruments in her research into second language reading ability.

All I have done is notice their direct potential as learning activities and fill out bare ideas into semi-lesson outlines. I am not sure whether they need further modification:

#### A.

### **Judging Meaning**

Tell the students they are going to hear ten sentences. If they feel the sentences are meaningful they are to raise their hands. They are also to try and remember the **first and last** word of each sentence. No writing allowed.

Read out these sentences:

- The five- star hotel managed her brother*
- The train for Birmingham left at 5.15*
- Did several cats wrote a book about teachers?*
- The train at platform 7 has no wheels*
- Seventeen and five is twenty one*
- Tomorrow was yesterday.*
- The fishing boat wasn't back by dawn.*
- He did it once, repeatedly.*
- The toast burnt in the sunshine.*
- Wednesday follows Tuesday.*

Pair the students and ask them now to write down the first and last words of each sentence.

A student puts the first and last word of the first sentence up on the board. The group helps him complete the sentence. You elicit the students' judgement about meaning.

Do this with the other nine sentences, too.

**B. Fill-in the Summary Gaps**

Give the students a reading text. They read it, ask about things they don't understand, use dictionaries and then read it a second time. You take the text back in.

You now give them a summary of the text that has gaps in. They fill in the Summary gaps.

( Alternatively you give them a translation of the passage into their mother tongue, which you have gapped at strategic points..... They have to fill in the gaps. )

**C. From listening to mimicking**

Have the students listen to a text that is relatively easy for them to understand.

Give them the tapescript and have them read and listen at the same time.

Ask them to listen again and sub-vocalise the text as they read with their eyes.

Ask them to turn the tapescript over, and speak along behind the text, following, as closely as they can, the speed, pitch, volume and accent of the speaker.

**D. The last bit you remember**

Tell the students they will be listening to a speaker ( you or someone else), and everytime the speaker stops, they are to jot down as much of the last bit they have just heard as they can accurately. ( most people remember a sense-group or a couple of sense-groups.)

The speaker begins and stops abruptly after 45 seconds...pauses for 10-20 seconds, while they write, and then carries on for about 45 seconds.... etc.....

The speech should last 8 to 10 minutes, with a break each minute or so.

Pair the students and get them to use the snippets to reconstruct what they have heard.

End with a discussion of the process, as the students experienced it.

**Ways of Doing**, with Paul Davis and Barbara Garside, Cambridge, 1999  
Plenty articles in Pilgrims' webzine for teachers: **Humanising Language Teaching**,  
[www.hltmag.co.uk](http://www.hltmag.co.uk), which Mario also edits.  
Articles in **The Teacher Trainer**, Pilgrims' journal for teacher trainers.

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