

Creativity in the Classroom

by Candy Fresacher

It is well known that a positive atmosphere, a sense of fun, and the feeling that classroom activities are games are all conducive to better learning and increased strengthening of the synapses of the brain which help us remember ideas. You can find these ideas confirmed and reconfirmed in books on the brain (for example: *Teaching with the Brain in Mind, How the Brain Learns*), books on the psychology of happiness, (*Happiness, Lessons from a New Science*, or *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill*) or by watching The Last Lecture: Achieving your Childhood Dreams by Randy Pausch on uTube (or buying the book) or just reading something by Andrew Wright, or having attended his sessions at the TEA summer school this summer.

The question, remains, however, how do we integrate all that fun into a curriculum that is given to us by the authorities and requires old-fashioned testing and text-book learning that is integrated into the whole school process?

Penny Ur, in her session on interactivity and learning which she presented to the English Department of the University of Vienna in the spring of 2008, took the example of playing Hangman as a way to learn vocabulary. With the participants, she actually went through the actions of putting the gallows on the board and playing a short game of Hangman with everyone in the room calling out various letters. Afterwards, she asked why a teacher would use the game in the classroom. The response was: for fun vocabulary building. However, when she then asked how long did we actually spend on vocabulary building, all the participants realised that of the 3 minutes it took to play the game, maybe 5 seconds were spent on the vocabulary part. The very interactivity of playing the game showed the participants a totally different outcome to be learned: namely, that not all games bring more learning or the learning we had hoped for. If the teacher realises that the game is not for vocabulary building, but for some other purpose, such as a reward for other good work, then it is fine to use it.

There are creative ways to teach, then, that will help our students and can be integrated into the classroom, but it is important to always keep in mind the goals of the activities. There are many teachers who prove the point. Among our TEA members, Elisabeth Mayer comes to mind as someone who has started an English language drama club for her students. This has been so successful that the students are also writing their own plays and then performing them. Has this increased their language ability? Certainly! And I think even the students would agree. And they enjoyed doing it. And it will be a lifelong memory. So, that is one way to incorporate creativity in the English lesson. Elisabeth said she started out by just having students enact parts of plays to help with pronunciation and fluency and make texts more interesting (and fun). But she admits what she is doing now requires a lot of out-of-the-classroom work, so perhaps it is not for everyone.

What can be done within the classroom?

First, it is important to think about the curriculum and the textbooks we use as if they were a school uniform. If you teach in a place that still has school uniforms, you know that the purpose of such uniforms is to promote school loyalty and encourage a sense of unity as well as curtail individuality in favour of the team/school spirit. A curriculum is very similar. However, looking at what students do with their school uniforms, it becomes quickly apparent

that there are many ways students show their individuality despite the uniform. Skirts rolled up, shirts buttoned incorrectly, one could go on and on and it sometimes takes up much of a teachers' conference time to deal with what to do with these individuals. Teachers can also show their own individuality in the classroom, even though they are still using the textbook and having tests that are required by schools and ministry to foster the oneness of classes and curricula.

How can we help students to learn vocabulary? Are they still using vocabulary books or have you tried having them visualize a room and then once this room is well established in their minds, having them place the words around the room and walk around and look at the words in their minds. Visualisation techniques of all kinds can be used with minimal extra time taken from a lesson, but with effective results because it makes the learning fun. See the book: *Imagine that! Mental imagery in the EFL classroom*. But many teachers are also using mind maps (trademark by Tony Buzan). These maps engage both the left side of the brain (with vocabulary/words) and the right side (making sure students add pictures to the map). Remind students who say they can't draw that in the early years of schooling all children consider themselves artists. Only as we get older are we more critical of our own artistic abilities. And wasn't being a child fun? What a pity to forget an activity that was previously so exciting.

One of the reasons learning should be fun and a positive experience for the individual is that the individual will then like the subject and, maybe not in your own time with them, but in the future go on to learn and want to learn more about the subject. How good for us as teachers to know that our students will want to learn more about our subject throughout their lives.

Have you given poetry a chance in the classroom? Poetry is an excellent chance for students to be creative in a fun way. Andrew Wright says it is also important to publish the works they produce – on a website or in a booklet. Publishing makes the language come alive and be alive for others to look at. Students will want their work to be word perfect if many others are likely to see it. If poetry is too scary, have them write a short story, or, as you can see in this issue of the *ELT News*, just have them write creative excuse notes. It makes your job more interesting too.

Creating stories is yet another way to practice language skills using both sides of the brain. The topic can be related to a textbook topic, yet have a personal note. When a student can identify the topic with his/her own life, learning is better. When a student creates a story, both right and left sides of the brain are being engaged which promotes easier learning. In the August/September 2008 issue of *Scientific American Mind*, (vol 19, no. 4) an article on story telling connects reading stories (fiction) and listening to them with an improvement of social skills as well: particularly empathy.

Lessons with Laughter by George Woolard lets students create captions for cartoons, or finish a story by creating their own last line. It takes a good eye to spot the grammar mistakes in the various newspaper advertisements. One letter changes the whole meaning and is sure to get a laugh. It would be great if our students wanted to do extra work, were willing to give that something extra because they enjoyed using the language.

So, is it really possible to get adults to have fun in a classroom – will they throw a beanbag back and forth while repeating vocabulary, or will bankers or other business types get down to the business of learning through laughter? My experience has been, yes. But the teacher is also key. You must be willing to take the risks. Find good books with the right activities and

give them a try. The theory is out there and says it is a good way to get students – all types of students - to learn: so now is your chance to put it into practice and learn the positive effects yourself.