Two sides of the same coin: Creative and Critical Thinking in the ELT Classroom

In the *Future of Jobs* survey carried out by the World Economic Forum, creative and critical thinking were listed amongst the top ten skills needed by future employees. Equally, many English language teachers understand the importance of these skills as a way to make language more memorable. Here are some ideas and activities you can use and adapt for your classroom.

Reverse brainstorming

Creative thinking is often used synonymously to mean divergent thinking; whilst the two terms aren't exactly the same thing, divergent thinking activities certainly encourage creativity. One well-known activity that language teachers use is brainstorming which requires divergent thinking. Brainstorming is a good way to find out what students know about a lesson topic and a way to approach and solve a problem. For an alternative way to brainstorm which students will find fun, try *Reverse Brainstorming*. The idea is that instead of brainstorming the right way to do something, you brainstorm the wrong ways to do something. For example, if you were starting a lesson on 'Learning', you might ask students to think of effective ways to learn a language; but with *Reverse Brainstorming* you ask students to think of ways to learn a language badly. Often this can be a more creative and productive way to come up with ideas.

Present someone else's idea

Another way to generate ideas quickly is to give students a problem or challenge such as 'How can we raise more money for a charity?' Every student writes on idea on a piece of paper and then they put their ideas into a hat (or box). Next every student pulls out an idea from the hat (not their own). Each student has to then present the idea on the piece of paper to the rest of the class and sell the idea. So the aim is that every students presents someone else's idea; this gives the possibility that each student gives an idea a different slant and generates more reasons for the idea which the originator maybe hadn't thought of.

Setting limitations

We often use the phrase *Thinking outside the box* when talking about creativity but, in fact, lots of creative thinking takes place when there are limits set. For example, if you asked students to write a dialogue on a topic to practice certain vocabulary or expressions, you tell students to write 7 lines only. Line 1 has 7 words. Line 2 has six words. Line 3 has five words, until Line 7 can only have 1 word. Here's an example of such a dialogue written between a teacher and student:

B: How do you feel the job's going?
E: I think it's going quite well.
B: You didn't meet your targets.
E: Not all of them.
B: None of them.
E: Oh dear.
B: Exactly.

The Pixar Code

The Pixar Code is a good example of creating a story within limitations. Pixar Films such as *Toy Story* or *Finding Nemo* often follow a six-sentence story line that goes like this:
Once upon a time… / Everyday…. / One day…. / Because of that… / Because of that… / Until finally…
Teach students this structure the next time you ask them to write a story – it will make it much easier for them to create a new one.

Ask creative and critical thinking questions

For students to think creatively and critically, the teacher needs to ask the right kinds of questions. These thinking skills can't happen in classrooms where only Yes/No closed questions are asked or where it is only the teacher who asks the questions. Here are some examples of questions both you and your students can ask:

Creative thinking	Critical thinking
• What else…? • How could you make it better? • What would happen if… • What do you think will happen next? • How could we do it differently? • Can you add something…?	• Why does the speaker/writer believe that…? • What evidence supports…? • What is the purpose of…? • How is this structured? • Where can I find more information about…?

Finding ideas and thinking critically about texts

In order to think creatively (and learn new language), it's important for students to get new ideas from texts. However, when reading texts, students need to consider how reliable the information is. This exercise will get them thinking about where the reliability of 21st century texts. There isn't an absolutely 100% correct answer and, if students are thinking critically, they will often answer that "It depends."

Work in pairs. Look at these different sources of information and score the reliability of each one:

1 = Not a reliable source

2 = It might be reliable, but I'd need to check the information in another source.

3 = It's usually a reliable source.

A A shared post on social media

B An article in a newspaper

C A video on YouTube

D A documentary on TV with interviews

E A published book by a qualified academic

F A photograph on a news website

G Your own research

H An entry on Wikipedia

References and further reading

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