

# Learning to Teach Creatively

Submitted to the Committee for the Assessment of Student Competence at the School for New Learning of DePaul University for A-2-X. Approved Spring 2006. Used with permission of the author. Annotations by Michelle Navarre Cleary, Assistant Professor and Writing Coordinator, The School for New Learning.

Competency A-2-X: Can teach language to students in a creative manner

Teaching a language is similar to being an actor. The actor attempts to draw the audience in, to engage the spectator. Even though the story line or subject is dull, engagement can snag the interest of the audience. Engagement on the stage can be induced by the scenery, dialogue, body language, music, and props. If one thinks about the Nutcracker Suite, as an example, the story can be told without words. In this piece, the music, movements, gestures, body language, and costumes all work together to engage the audience and communicate the story. Teaching a language is very similar to being an actor.

Learning a language obviously requires the use of words. For many students, being in an environment where sounds are made in a foreign tongue creates feelings of frustration, panic and even boredom. These feelings can hamper motivation and interest. Inside the language classroom, teachers need to be creative performers to engage the students effectively. Sharing one's personality and life experience using the spoken word can duplicate the feeling of real life. The duplication of real life can provide a safety net for the learner and ease some of the above feelings that may impede learning. The teacher as a creative performer can engage the audience with the use of space, warm-ups, humor, gestures and facial expressions, music, and props such as objects, flash cards and photos taken from every day life. The teacher of language who demonstrates that a cup is a cup, in English, or Spanish, or Chinese, can bring reality into the learning of a foreign language. Some of the mystery can be taken out of language learning if the

**Commentaire :** An ILP paper is a paper and all papers should have titles. A title tells readers that you know how to dress your paper for success.

**Commentaire :** Put your competence statement at the start of your paper to help you stay focused on it. Your competence statement acts like a thesis in that it is what you are trying to demonstrate in your paper.

If you have criteria for your competence statement, put the criteria here also. Often, the criteria give you the start of an outline for your paper by setting out the major points you need to cover.

**Commentaire :** Often you will start your paper with a pre-written competence statement. In this case, the student wrote his own competence statement. However, he did not write the competence statement until after drafting his paper. He started knowing that he wanted to get competence credit for his ESOL certification. He quickly realized that he wanted to focus on creativity and teaching. With this in mind, he drafted this paper and then wrote the competence statement.

**Commentaire :** By comparing teaching to acting, something we already recognize as creative, the student uses an analogy to help make his point that teaching is creative. As you read, you will see that he returns to this analogy throughout his essay so that it not only helps to make his point, it also helps to unify his essay.

**Commentaire :** Having set up his main point that teaching is a creative act in the previous paragraph, the student uses this next paragraph to explicitly state his claim and tell why his claim is important by showing how creativity addresses common problems in language instruction.

Early in your papers, you also want to let the reader know why they should care about what you have written. Here, the student argues that he has a solution to some common problems. Providing solutions is one of many reasons readers might care about what you have to say. Other reasons for readers to care include your ability to entertain, inform or provoke them.

student can relate the language to their everyday life and conversation. This basic method of teaching is supported by educator Raymond J. Wlodkowski. He says, "Instruction is a pragmatic art. We create and perform useful communication for the benefit of our learners" (17).

**Commentaire :** Note that by including this adjective, the student lets us know that Wlodkowski is a valid authority because his expertise is in teaching.

### ESOL Certification Training & Spanish Practicums

The ESOL certification course that I completed two years ago, introduced me to creative teaching techniques. We learned to plan lessons, practice teaching methodologies, write clear learning objectives for students, present new material and communicate the meaning to the students. In addition to learning how to assess students' progress in meeting the learning objectives, we were shown how to let the students practice the new material and use it in real communication. We sought to accomplish this by making language learning real and achievable. We strived to set the students up for success and give them the opportunity to fail in a non-threatening, friendly and comfortable learning environment. What I learned and applied to my teaching was recognized by my instructors Ron and Ellen Bradley in my final evaluation. They stated;

**Commentaire :** Having made his claim about the centrality of creativity and the art of teaching in his paper, the student now cites an authority to support his assertion. You should aim to support your assertions with a variety of kinds of evidence including citing authorities as well as examples from your experience.

**Commentaire :** In this first section of the body of his paper, the student shows how his learning has been recognized and certified by others through both his ESOL certification and evaluations of his teaching. Note that not included with this version of his paper are appendices in which the student attached copies of his certificate and evaluations. Similarly, you should plan to have copies of any certificates or other recognition of our learning to hand in with your ILP.

If you have recognition of your learning, including awards, publications or evaluations, do not be shy about sharing them. In this case, the student was reluctant to share his evaluations because doing so felt like bragging to him. However, part of the point of the student's paper is to show that he can teach well. Therefore, this evidence is necessary to support his point. Like the student, your job is to show your learning in your ILP, so do not be modest.

The student brought inquisitiveness, maturity and sensitivity to his work, he was able to quickly build excellent rapport with his students and used humor effectively in the classroom. His intelligence, energy, and personality will serve him well in future teaching situations.

Today, I am teaching Spanish practicums at DePaul University. The practicums are conducted entirely in Spanish and presented in a workshop format to support and compliment the regular Spanish 101 class. The idea of the practicum is to give students the opportunity to communicate in Spanish using as many words as they can. The use of gesticulation and hand signals are encouraged to assist the student in getting their point across. The practicum is an

**Commentaire :** By discussing not only the certification, but also the practicums, the student shows that he has transferred and applied his ESOL certificate learning, using the lessons he learned about teaching non-native speakers English to teach English-speakers Spanish.

arena for the student to practice without being afraid of making mistakes. They can be "on stage" and experiment with their knowledge of the language. The instructor should set the scene for a friendly and non-threatening environment.

Thus far I have received favorable feedback from the students. On the spring 2005 evaluation my average score was 4.95 out of a possible 5.00 (Modern...303,304,307; see appendices).

Students were also asked to respond in writing to the two following questions;

- 1) What was the most valuable thing that you learned from this class?
- 2) What was most difficult for you in this class and what could have been done to help you with it?

The following are some of the answers I received in response to question number one (1).

These responses suggested that I effectively motivated the students.

"I learned how to speak in real life, everyday situations."

"The professor was great! He helped everyone so we were all on the same page."

"He made everything very easy and understandable."

"The instructor helped my enthusiasm level increase."

Here are some of the responses to question number two (2), which suggest that I was able to make goals achievable and understandable.

"No difficulty, The student did an excellent job incorporating ideas and concepts not available in my regular Spanish class."

"There was nothing difficult, due to the fact that The student was very helpful and understanding."

"None. This class was great!"

**Commentaire :** The student gives both quantitative information, in the form of this average score, and qualitative information, in the form of the quotes below, to support his assertion of the success of his teaching methods. These two different kinds of support mutually reinforce each other since the numbers by themselves are not very descriptive, while the quotes by themselves are not necessarily representative.

My success in the ESOL certification course and the effectiveness of the progressive methodologies taught by the ESOL instructors are illustrated by the comments from the practicum students. The artistic approach to teaching, as I prefer to call it, perhaps is not the norm in the university environment. Nevertheless, it captures my imagination and I will continue to teach in an artistic and creative manner. Creative, progressive teaching is an artistic endeavor supported by Gilbert Highet. He writes,

I believe that teaching is an art, not a science... Teaching is not like inducing a chemical reaction: it is much more like painting a picture or making a piece of music, or on a lower level like planting a garden or writing a friendly letter. (vii, viii)

Techniques that help me teach language in a creative manner include improvisation, humor, warm-ups, and realia (use of authentic objects).

### Improvisation

The actor normally has a script to follow which allows him or her to develop a story throughout each scene and act, providing the audience with continuity. A missed cue or a forgotten line does not have to disrupt this continuity. Improvisation can allow the actor to regain their momentum and finish the scene or act without affecting the final outcome. Improvisation can offer alternative ways to tell the story. Improvising can be a natural reaction or a reaction that is learned after many years of experience.

The mantra of the instructors all through the ESOL training course was "be prepared for the unexpected." Truer words were never spoken. During training we were required to write substantial lesson plans, but I quickly learned that the "plan" was not always sacrosanct. On one day of practice teaching, I taught a cultural awareness class. The students, who represented countries from all over the world, were invited to discuss their opinions about American life and

**Commentaire :** Note that the student is careful to sum up the point of the evidence he has just given. Do not leave it to readers to draw their own conclusions from your evidence. Often, they will not draw the same conclusions you would. More often, they will not draw any conclusions at all.

**Commentaire :** Note that in introducing Highet, the student sums up how Highet supports the student's claims. In using sources, your goal should be to show how your ideas are in conversation with those of others. If you simply drop quotes into your paper without relating them to your ideas, you are not in conversation with anyone.

**Commentaire :** Note that the student uses this list to set up the next four sections of his paper. This list, combined with the headings, helps the reader know where they are in the paper. In each of the next four sections, the student also uses the same organizational structure, moving from an explanation of the technique that links it to performance, to how he learned that technique in ESOL training, to how he applied that learning in his practicum. This parallel organization also helps the student clearly communicate his points. Note that in earlier drafts, he had a much longer list of points about teaching. As he revised, he focused on and developed the points best linked to his performance analogy.

**Commentaire :** The student uses headings to help the reader follow the organization of the essay. Headings are useful for longer papers, but they are no substitute for transitions and topic sentences.

**Commentaire :** The student follows his claim about the need to be prepared to improvise with a well-developed, specific example that serves both to explain and support his claim.

make comparisons to their own cultures. Varied impressions of American life were discussed, both negative and positive. Some of the students became quite vociferous. Because I agreed with many of their opinions, my impulse was to jump in and persuade or dissuade and become emotionally involved. Adding more fuel to the emotional fire, two students from different Asian countries which suffered strained relations sparred for a few uncomfortable minutes. In both situations, I was able to step back, control my emotions and give the students the freedom to interact in a creative, engaging, and autonomous environment. Fortunately, there was no blood drawn and, most importantly, the students were speaking and interacting in English with no guidance from me! The emotion and catharsis that surfaced in this class were unexpected and certainly not written into my lesson plan.

In my experience, I have learned that teaching in an artistic and creative manner implies that the instructor be flexible and able to improvise. Sometimes, I may have to pause during a lesson plan and address a question raised by a student. I am not responsible for teaching grammar, but if the question is about a problematic grammar point that may cloud further learning, I will attempt to clear up any confusion. A few minutes of diversion from a lesson plan could be instrumental in helping students learn. Answering a question of one brave student could eliminate confusion for several others. Nevertheless, basic formats such as lesson plans and pedagogical maps should be used to direct the flow. Elliot Eisner points out in *The Educational Imagination*, the teacher must find that fine line between routine and non-forecasted situations that arise in the classroom (155). In other words, improvisation is necessary for the teacher to express themselves in an artistic manner (155). Eisner adds that "the presence of well-developed routines or teaching repertoires enables the teacher to deal inventively with what occurs in class" (155).

**Commentaire :** The student makes clear how his creative techniques can fit within and alongside more traditional teaching tools. By making this connection between his idea and standard teaching ideas, the student demonstrates that he has reflected upon and put his learning in the context of others.

**Commentaire :** The student uses experts, in this case Eisner, to support his claims. You may also cite experts with whom you disagree. The point is to put your ideas in conversation with others, but you do not always have to agree with them.

In the Spanish practicums, I continue to observe that the lesson plan cannot always dictate the flow of the group. We are individuals as learners and differ in our learning styles. Some prefer analytical, logical and rote style. Others learn predominantly through auditory channels, and some are visual learners. The teacher must be aware of their students various learning styles. Improvisation plays an important role in addressing learning preferences. For example, when I introduce a new word to the class, I will say the word several times, write the word on the blackboard, and have the students pronounce the word in unison. I may then ask a question using the new word. Additionally, if I have a picture that illustrates the object or action, I will show the picture to the class. The students will have heard the new word, seen the new word written, spoken the new word, and have been shown a picture of the new word. Wlodkowski suggest that using various forms of communication are "the ways in which instructors interact with the learners and the activities that learners can participate in while they are learning" (153, 154). Wlodkowski also implies that by shifting from one process of learning to another, the students are encouraged to "think or act differently from what they have been doing"(154). Each time the teacher changes the learning strategy, students "must use different mental and physical resources"(154). These changes stimulate the learner (154, 155).

**Commentaire :** Note how the student uses this transitional phrase to move the reader to his application of improvisation in the Spanish practicums.

As mentioned before, I am required to cover certain parts of the curriculum in a very short period of time. Improvisation is not always easy, nor are the results guaranteed. Sometimes when I divert from the lesson plan to answer a question, the answer may result in further confusion, especially if it is a complex grammatical point that has not been covered yet in the regular Spanish class. If this occurs, I ask the students to wait until the subject has been addressed in the regular class. It is much easier to clarify grammar questions if the student has some basic knowledge of the case in point. Eisner admits, "It is precisely the tension between

**Commentaire :** The student acknowledges the difficulties and limitations of improvisation. In so doing, the student enhances his authority by demonstrating that he is a careful and critical thinker. The lesson here is not to avoid or try to cover over problems, but to address them forthrightly.

**Commentaire :** Having acknowledged a problem, the student also points out how he handles the problem while going on to acknowledge that he has more to learn.

authenticity and inventiveness that makes teaching, like any other art, so complex and "undertaking" (155). It is certain that I need a lot more experience before I can effectively find that fine line between routine and improvisation in non-forecasted situations, and deal with the reality of time constraints.

### Humor

I have learned in ESOL training and in the Spanish practicums that humor has an important role to play in the learning environment. Individuals may feel uncomfortable and inadequate when they are immersed in a foreign language. Humor can diffuse tension and provide levity in this stressful situation. Wlodkowski suggests that the instructor "use humor liberally and frequently. Humor is many things and one of them is interesting. People love to laugh. They will be a little more interested in anyone or anything that provides this possibility" (161).

**Commentaire :** Note how the student uses this first paragraph on humor to show that his embrace of humor had been validated in his training (ESOL), his experience (practicums) and by experts (Wlodkowski).

One way I incorporate humor into the classroom is to share my personal experience learning languages. I share anecdotes of embarrassing situations that occurred because of words I mispronounced, misused, or misunderstood. Students like nothing more than to hear about their instructor's foibles. Sharing my experiences of vulnerability allows the students to relate to the universal frustration of learning a language. Another way that I incorporate humor into the classroom is by playing off of the students. It is wonderful when students use their creativity and sense of humor in the class. A few weeks ago, I asked a student to describe himself, in Spanish. He responded by saying, "I am very intelligent and good-looking." He was having fun and so did I. I turned to the class and said, "Ladies you do think that John is intelligent and good-looking?" Of course, the ladies' responses were just as fun and teasing. These moments are as enjoyable for the students as they are for the instructor. The students feel relaxed and adventuresome enough to get creative. The instructors can rejoice that the students are talking

**Commentaire :** Be sure to include specific, detailed examples like this to make sure your readers get your point.

and being creative! Writing about the teacher in Teaching as an Art, Highet reflects that "when people laugh together" we erase all our differences in status, roles etc. (55). We simply are people enjoying life (55). Humor allows us to accept our humanity and not take ourselves too seriously. Individuals may feel more creative when they feel human!

It is important that we understand the old adage; we should not laugh at people but with them. For example, instructors should never laugh at a mispronounced word. And of course we must be aware that there may be individuals who do not appreciate humor in the classroom. Nonetheless, I have seen that most times laughter can be the best medicine, and I will continue to incorporate humor in the classroom when I deem it appropriate and helpful.

### Warm-ups

I was introduced to the warm-up during the ESOL certification course. I admit I was skeptical at first because I erroneously associated warm-ups with such activities as role playing and being "put on the spot." I learned that warm-up activities ranged from simple introductions and shaking hands, to the more complex and creative, groups chanting to each other in back and forth responses, or the human knot. The human knot was physical and encouraged not only movement and togetherness, but verbal communication. A knot was formed by the students, strategically holding hands, and the group had to untie themselves with a lot of weaving, dipping and verbal orders. The result of this warm-up was remarkable. Since all of the ESL students were from around the world and many Asian, known for their shyness and quiet nature, I discovered that these warm-ups were instrumental in breaking the ice. Quiet, reticent groups converted into gaggle of individuals working as a team. Other warm-ups, just as theatrical, were equally effective in promoting a sense of togetherness and purpose that set the tone for learning. The class would become more relaxed, friendly, comfortable and engaged. In his book The Art

**Commentaire :** Note how the student uses examples to illustrate his point and reference to an expert to give authority to his examples. Examples can engage and help convince your reader, but they need to be backed up by other evidence such as quantitative data or the authority of experts. Without the back up of this other evidence, your examples can always be dismissed as just a couple of cases that may or may not be representative of the larger reality.

**Commentaire :** Having made his point, the student is careful to qualify it to make sure that he is not misunderstood.

**Commentaire :** By acknowledging his initial skepticism, the student also addresses readers' potential reservations.

**Commentaire :** Note that the student lists a number of potential warm-up activities, demonstrating the breadth of his knowledge, and then focuses in on a detailed description of one activity to show the depth of his knowledge. When you have more to say than you have the space or time for, this strategy of giving a list of the possible topics and then focusing in on one or two is a good one. It is a much better strategy than just saying a little about each since the detail of the ones you focus on shows that you really know what you are talking about. When you use this strategy, do end your list with the topics you intend to discuss in more detail, as the student did here.



of Teaching, Gilbert Highet notes that each of us must feel comfortable in the environment in which we work (26). This is also true for the students. If the teacher enjoys the classroom, the students will pick up on the feeling. Warm-ups can be the catalyst to set the tone not only between the students, but between the teacher and the students.

Since I witnessed the positive effects of the warm-ups, I use them whenever possible in the Spanish practicums. I enthusiastically introduce a warm-up on the first day of class to "break the ice. Time constraints were rarely a problem with the three hour ESOL classes; however, in the one hour Spanish practicum, I must incorporate the warm-up in a more creative manner. I usually play music (Spanish music, of course) while the students assemble. I will then either ask questions using recently learned verbs and vocabulary that are related to everyday conversations and experiences, or I will have the students ask each other questions using the recently learned verbs and vocabulary. This can be accomplished while the students are seated, or they can circulate around the classroom and mingle with each other. Educators Penny Ur and Andrew Wright emphasize that a pleasurable and entertaining warm-up period should be a learning experience; an activity in which "the students can and should continue to practice, learn, increase knowledge and improve thinking" (xi). The students appreciate the practice and repetition of verbs and vocabulary in a relaxed environment. Because I introduce the warm-ups on the first day of class, the students know that they will be required to participate, so there is no element of surprise. The students' energetic participation and positive feedback indicate to me that the warm-up enhances the learning experience.

### **Realia (the use of authentic objects)**

Another technique I learned during the ESOL certification course was the use of objects and items seen in everyday life. We used every manner of real life paraphernalia; clocks, costumes,

**Commentaire** : Note the transitional phrase to move us to the next topic.

checkbooks, silverware and plates. We brought groceries, toiletries, photographs and money into the classroom. Many learning tasks were accomplished with charts, word splashes, poems, films, music, maps, and wooden blocks and rods. We used virtually anything we could think of to make the learning experience richer and more theatrical. The incorporation of these objects into the classroom provided rewarding and exciting experiences for both the students, and the teachers. The objects were used by the instructors and the students to perform skits, make grocery lists, plan parties, follow recipe instructions and actually prepare food in class! Students brought photographs of their families and wrote postcards. The instructors incorporated music, singing and film into the classroom. The students were told stories and then they would re-tell the story using blocks and wooden rods to depict people, places and things. We weaved the reality of everyday life into the language learning experience in very dramatic fashion.

The Spanish practicums that I teach today are more challenging because of the elementary level of the classes. The students have limited or no knowledge of the Spanish language. I am also required to show specific episodes of a film selected for this quarter's curriculum. I am responsible for assessing the student's knowledge and comprehension of the film by showing the episodes several times and allowing the students to display their comprehension through various oral, audio and written exercises. The film itself is realia because it contains a real life story, with believable characters and everyday conversation.

The logistics of teaching Spanish in the university limits the use of bringing inordinate amounts of objects to the classroom; nevertheless, I use as many as possible. I bring in flash cards, photos and maps that correspond to regular class subjects. I also make use of objects in the room; doors, chairs, books, chalkboard, and items or clothing that the students have brought into the classroom. For example, if the text has introduced the words for clothing, I can ask questions

such as; "What are you wearing?" "What color is it?" "What does one wear when it is cold?" etc. These questions facilitate conversation and interaction between the students. The use of objects appeals to the learners visual and tactile senses. Raymond Wlodkowski points out that using various techniques to appeal to the sensual learning process can be effective in "stimulating greater learner attention" (154).

**Commentaire :** The student gives reasons for why he uses this strategy, linking it to theories of learning.

The students are exposed to grammatical and theoretical teaching during their regular Spanish class. Additionally, they must memorize verbs, tenses, and vocabulary on their own. I find the practicum an ideal arena for using realia as an adjunct to the necessary rote learning, and as a diversion from the required tedious memorization of language learning. These diversions from purely grammatical and rote exercises allow the students to experiment with their creative expression. I have discovered that during these moments of levity, students will be less fearful of making mistakes and have fun while they practice basic, realistic conversation.

Language learning is not an abstraction for me. I attempt to teach language as a living concrete reality. Making connections between the world and a word or object provides learning that is vital, human, and more consistent with the human nature of communication. The effectiveness of using realia in the classroom is supported by the high level of student engagement that I have witnessed in the classroom and by positive student feedback.

**Commentaire :** The student concludes this section by connecting this teaching technique to his teaching philosophy and by making a claim for this technique's effectiveness.

### Final Thoughts

The techniques and thoughts that I have discussed in this paper are by no means novel or the only way to teach. I have subscribed to these ideas because, in my personal journey as a student and as an instructor, I have witnessed their benefits. As I continue to learn and teach, I will strive to invite the students in, allow them to create their own learning, and use their own

imaginations. I hope to provide them an experience that has value and an objective in sight, but a journey with a colorful combination of reality, truth, humility and fun.

One discouraging observation made by Elliot Eisner in The Educational Imagination suggests that teachers new to the profession may enter the field with dreams of their own (377). Soon they discover that they must change their ideas to conform to the philosophy of the institution (377). He further notes that some teachers may leave the profession rather than compromise their own perspective on teaching (377). Even though I must curb some of my creative zeal in the practicum classroom, my enthusiasm has not been dampened. I enjoy teaching, and I am very excited about my new career as an instructor.

There remains much for me to learn in the academic teaching environment. Education in the classroom is in a constant flux. Learning in life can be never ending. I need to be aware of these truisms and go gently with the flow, but I will always attempt to teach in a creative manner.

**Commentaire :** The student concludes by looking toward the future.

### Works Cited

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Ur,Penny, and Andrew Wright. Introduction. Five Minute Activities. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

**Commentaire :** This student is using the Modern Language Association (MLA) citation format. Depending upon your subject matter and the desires of your faculty mentor, you might also use the American Psychological Association (APA) citation format.

**Commentaire :** Usually, your sources should be published relatively recently except in the case of primary sources like historical documents. However, in this case, the student's mentor suggested this classic text which the student found quite useful.

Wlodkowski, Raymond J. Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.

**Commentaire :** If you have read through this paper before beginning your own ILP, you might be feeling a bit overwhelmed at this point. You might be thinking, "How am I ever going to be able to keep all of this in mind at once?" Don't worry. You won't and the student didn't. It took the student several drafts of this paper to get it to this point.

So, take a deep breath, and just start writing. Start by describing your experience or summarizing what you think you learned or whatever comes first to your mind. Once you have some ideas down on paper, get some feedback from others. Talk to your family or friends about your ideas, visit one of DePaul's [Writing Centers](#), put the paper aside for a day or two, then work on it some more and run drafts by your Faculty Mentor.