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## **The Creative Teacher: Learning From Psychology and Art Education to Develop Our Creative Processes in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages**

This article explores the teaching of English to speakers of other languages as an art, and as such, how teachers can engage in the creative process to develop their own teaching and encourage students to gain more meaningful and effective language skills. Drawing on the work of psychologists, art educators, and creative pedagogy, the writer details four stages in the creative process (Wallas, 1926/2014) and eight habits (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan, 2013) to practice within those stages to help all teachers identify, evaluate, and develop their creativity. A grammar lesson from the writer's work as an ESL instructor in reading/writing for graduate students in art and design is used to exemplify how we can all become more creative and successful facilitators of language learning.

### **Introduction**

**B**efore starting my current position as an ESL instructor at an art and design university in San Francisco, California, I enjoyed looking at art, had taken literature and art history courses in college, and had written some fiction for fun. I never considered myself especially creative, nor did I intentionally seek out a job in which I would be surrounded by artistic people. I saw myself as a normal ESL teacher who loved my job, was passionate about cross-cultural understanding and travel, kind of a grammar nerd, and interested, like most teachers, in continuing to develop my own teaching skills. I began my first semester with my art and design students by saying, "I am not an artist. My specialty is not art, but language and language learning." I

would show them ways to use language for academic and art-related contexts and strategies for how to continue developing their skills in and out of the classroom. In addition, I told them that I could be an informant for how native speakers use language, giving them an ear and eye for what sounded and looked “right” in their speaking and writing. It was in their art classes where their creative work would happen. Clearly, my understanding of creativity was limited, but luckily, teaching that first group of students was a crash course in creativity for me, as one of the first assignments in the curriculum was an essay about the students’ creative process. That first semester, I had to teach them how to write an essay about their own creative processes, and I did not really know what a creative process was. In learning about “the creative process,” I very soon came to see that not only could creativity happen anywhere, anytime, and for anyone, but that I, as an ESL teacher, participated in my own creative process in preparing for and teaching my classes. And certainly my students did use their creativity in my class, and they needed to continue improving their use of creative thinking for learning and using English, even for the most academic tasks, such as writing the five-paragraph essay. As I began to understand what creativity was and how to encourage it in myself and my students, I started to say to them, “I am not a visual artist. My art is teaching, which really means helping you learn. And you students, in addition to being a painter, or a fashion designer, or 3D animator, you are English language artists.”

Seeing ourselves as creative ESL teachers and students has allowed my students and me to engage in the messy creative process of language education, to take risks and try new things and make mistakes and keep trying, and to bring our passion for what we can create to our work together. Using the framework of language education as a creative process has also allowed me to gain confidence and expertise as a teacher, and beyond the walls of an art school, I believe all ESL teachers can benefit from viewing education in this way, each class as a “work of art,” a kind of socially engaged, participatory performance art. For ESL teachers who have not had the chance to be immersed in art education as well as language education, who have not had the firsthand experience of seeing how artists go about their creative processes and making the link to how similar creative processes can happen in language learning and teaching, this article is an exploration of the topic and an encouragement for all teachers to see themselves as creative artists. To begin with, I will make the argument that effective ESL teaching is an art, and therefore effective ESL teachers are artists who engage in the creative process. Second, I will define the steps of the creative process in order for ESL teachers to identify ways

in which they engage in their own creative processes and possibilities for deepening their engagement. Third, to increase our ability to develop and apply our creative ideas in the classroom, I will introduce the eight studio habits that art students practice in the art classroom, with an example from my own ESL class to demonstrate what these same habits and the creative process can look like for ESL teachers. Last, I will conclude with some challenges ESL teachers face that can deter us from developing our creative teaching.

### **ESL Teaching Is an Art**

If we look at English language education as an art and what we do as artistic and creative, we can draw from all the work done on creativity, especially in the field of art education, to do what we do better. We can better understand how to develop and refine our own creativity and gain the benefits that being creative can bring to our students and ourselves. Yet how can I call my ESL teaching an *art* and my teaching process *creative*? It begins with an understanding of what art and creativity are, and why they are important for every person, including ESL teachers who are creating opportunities for learning in every class. When you think about art, what comes to your mind? Some of us may think of aesthetically pleasing objects, paintings or sculptures, for example, that are beautiful or highly skilled representations of life or experiences, what we may call *fine art* (Encyclopedia of Art Education, n.d.). At the other end of the spectrum is the belief that art is everywhere. I have asked my art and design students to define art and many of them answer, “Art is everything.” I love their open-mindedness, and although I do not agree that anything and everything is art, I think they have got it right that when we expand the possibilities of what art is, we can see the world and all we do in new and transformative ways. When ESL teachers see the art in what we do, we can engage in a more creative process to refine our teaching. To see the art in what we do, let us refer to an ESL teacher’s good friend, the old *Merriam-Webster Learner’s Dictionary*, now online and so much lighter than carrying around that thick tome in our bags. Under the entry for *art* (noun):

**1** : [noncount] : something that is created with imagination and skill and that is beautiful or that expresses important ideas or feelings

- a piece of modern/contemporary *art*
- It’s a remarkable picture, but is it *art*?

— see also [OP-ART](#), [PERFORMANCE ART](#), [POP ART](#), [WORK OF ART](#)

**2** [noncount] : works created by artists : paintings, sculptures, etc., that are created to be beautiful or to express important ideas or feelings

- the *art* [=artwork] of Salvador Dali
  - The museum has a large collection of folk *art*.
  - African/Japanese/Mayan *art*
- often used before another noun
- *art* history
  - *art* objects
  - an *art* museum/gallery
- see also [ARTS AND CRAFTS](#)

**3** [noncount] : the methods and skills used for painting, sculpting, drawing, etc.

- He studied *art* in college.
- often used before another noun
- an *art* teacher/program

**4 a** [count] : an activity that is done to create something beautiful or to express important ideas or feelings

- She studied the *art* of drawing/painting/dance.
  - dance, drama, and other *art* forms
  - the performing/visual/graphic *arts*
- see also [FINE ART](#)

**b** *the arts* : painting, sculpture, music, theater, literature, etc., considered as a group of activities done by people with skill and imagination

- She's a patron of *the arts*.
- He wants the government to increase its funding for *the arts*. (*Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary*, n.d.)

As the definitions show, art does include fine art and can be decorative or illustrative, but as a whole, together the definitions give us an understanding of art that applies to ESL teaching: *Art is something or an activity that is created with imagination and skill*. Art expresses something important, the result of which could be as solid and lasting as a painting or a building, or as ephemeral as a dance performance or a moving speech. These more ephemeral pieces of art and art activities may be recorded, captured for future audiences, but some of their power may well come from the specific context in which they happen, including the artists' active participation with their audience. I am thinking here of art that was called "happenings," popular in the

1960s and that, according to Butler (2016),

required a more active participation from viewers/spectators, and were often characterized by an improvisational attitude. While certain aspects of the performance were generally planned, the transitory and improvisational nature of the event attempted to stimulate critical consciousness in the viewer and to challenge the notion that art must reside in a static object.

Is not stimulating critical consciousness an important purpose of what we do as ESL teachers?

When we are imaginative and effectively create learning with our students, our ESL teaching can be called art. I am not the first to call teaching an art. Sawyer (2011) describes the scholarship done on “teaching as a performance,” emphasizing expert teachers’ balance of structure and improvisation in the classroom and the collaborative performance between students and teachers. In this sense, teaching is not the kind of art that is created for its own sake nor simply aesthetically pleasing, although it may be. Creative ESL teachers create learning with our students. We do so in order for our and their lives to be more interesting and meaningful, so that our students and we can better communicate who we are, better understand ourselves and others, reflect on our communities and worlds—what is beautiful as well as horrible or amazing—and in the process, we can surprise and challenge ourselves to do and perceive in new ways (Polster, 2010). This is art.

It must be noted that just as not every painting is art, not every building or dance, not every “happening,” is art, and not everything we do in the ESL classroom is art. A piece of art requires the creator to have *skill* and *imagination*, to express something important in a unique and useful way that no one else could have or has done before; in other words, a work of art and the person who makes it must be creative (Robinson, 1999). The art of teaching ESL is the art of actively engaging in making something—opportunities for and facilitation of our students’ effective language learning—in a deliberate way, using imagination. We all know that like anyone, teachers can “phone it in.” Sometimes, we may follow the pages of a textbook and get the job done (although really, can we call this getting our jobs done?). On these days, we may feel pretty uncreative, and for many valid reasons, that was the best we could do that day. At the other end of the spectrum, we may play a game with our students, and we all have fun. Play and enjoyment are important, and they are aspects of creative teaching and learning. However, successful creative education

requires effective teaching and learning, so simply trying something new or playing a game are not creative ESL education in themselves. Rather, in creative ESL education, we use our critical- and creative-thinking skills to be better teachers, with the ultimate goal never being to simply “cover” a topic, get through a section in the textbook or curriculum, nor to just have fun. When we can bring awareness to our teaching and our students’ learning, and to our creative working processes, we can analyze and evaluate what we do: We can see what is working well and not so well and figure out what we can do better.

### **The Creative Process**

The creative process can be undertaken for any project or task in which we are challenged to come up with a unique product or result to solve a problem or reach a goal (Goleman & Kaufman, 1992; Robinson, 1999). If effective English language teaching and learning could be accomplished by following a textbook page by page, or by following the directions of another teacher’s activity, teachers and learners would not need to be creative. However, in every class, every activity a teacher decides to do, or every task she decides to assign, requires sensitivity to the specific group of students in the class, awareness of what the students know and need to know in that specific context, and what will inspire them to learn even when it is difficult and they are tired and busy, always with the big picture in mind of how one activity or one assignment fits into the larger goals of the class and even the much larger goals of the institution and students’ longer-term language needs. It can be overwhelming to consider everything a teacher must consider to be effective. However, it is also important to remember that each and all challenging situations, and the constraints inherent in them, are required for creativity (Maley, 2015). If we did not have struggles as teachers, such as we do not have enough time and our textbook activities are boring, we would not need to be creative, and we would not be able to be creative. Luckily, overcoming these challenges creatively, as with any skill, becomes more intuitive with practice and time (Coffey & Leung, 2016), so that we are not always consciously thinking about all the variables of a successful lesson or course and nevertheless we take them into account. Bringing this more conscious awareness to our creative processes of developing and teaching each lesson allows us to continue to evolve in what we do.

What does it look like to engage in the creative process as an ESL teacher? It is not just one event or lightbulb moment (Robinson, 1999): It is a nonlinear cycle of steps that may meander along for hours or days as we plod through information and attempt to invent solutions or come up with new ideas. And then suddenly we may

shoot off an imaginary mountain and fly as an idea comes to us that feels like just what we were looking for. And then we thump back to the ground with the hard work necessary to tug and twist our great idea into place. For example, we may see that every time we get to the grammar section of class, the energy in the room lags and some of our students look as if they are buckling down for the difficult work of understanding a complex structure, but others are quickly tuning out. As teachers, we know that there is something we have to do to change this dynamic. The grammar we are teaching is important and will be useful to our students, but we do not know how to encourage them to see it that way, to bring the grammar to life. Is it the way we explain it that is killing their interest? Or the practice examples in the textbook? Or the complex writing assignment that requires them to use the grammar that is overwhelming them, making them feel anxious? Or is it a combination of all of the above, along with the time of day (noon, maybe) and the fact that grammar has become for some students a detested topic, no matter who is teaching it? Simply asking these questions, identifying the problem and thinking about possible causes, is a step in the creative process. But it is not easy. Some ESL teachers may leave it there because they do not have the time or energy and actually do not believe that there is any way to solve the “I hate grammar; it’s just a chore” problem. If we decide not to give up, and instead work on finding ways to bring our love of the language and learning to everything we do in our classes, we can be creative ESL teachers who do not sweep the challenges under the rug. As Robinson states,

Creative activity involves playing with ideas and trying out possibilities. In any creative process there are likely to be dead-ends: ideas and designs that do not work. There may be many failures and modifications and much refashioning of imaginative activity before the best outcomes, the best “fit” is produced. (1999, p. 33)

There are many models for understanding the creative process, and the steps can be labeled in different ways. One of the oldest and still useful theories outlining the stages of the creative process, originally published in 1926, is by Graham Wallas (2014) from the field of psychology. His four stages are *preparation*, *incubation*, *illumination*, and *verification*. As an ESL teacher, do you recognize yourself and your teaching process in the stages described below? The first step in growing your own creativity to better meet the challenges in your classes, and enjoy your work more, is awareness of what creative people do while being creative.

Wallas’s first stage of the creative process, *preparation*, is the time



during which a problem is identified, analyzed, and investigated consciously and systematically in all directions in search of solutions. According to Goleman and Kaufman (1992), psychologists who have written some popular articles based on Wallas's stages, this stage is when "being receptive, being able to listen openly and well, is a crucial skill" (para. 3), and Bronson and Merryman (2010) write that "fact-finding and deep research are vital stages in the creative process" (para. 12). Both divergent thinking, coming up with new and unique ideas, and convergent thinking, evaluating and refining effective useful ideas, have been found to be necessary for creative thinking, and this first stage is where the most divergent thinking happens (Bronson & Merryman, 2010; Goodman, 2014). In his research on creative ESL teachers, Richards (2013) also concludes that "creative teachers are non-conformists" (p. 7) who search for new ways to meet challenges.

As teachers, we may have a little bit of trouble with the concepts of *divergent* and *nonconformist*; the words alone may have negative connotations. Do you think of something that is weird or wrong or not the way it "should" be? We have to admit that much traditional schooling has focused on being convergent or precise and perfect, correct, on the straight and narrow path. If you are a teacher like me, you were a good student and you learned how far being convergent could get you, and you tried not to be divergent. But allowing our ideas to wander off the beaten path into the world of the strange is a necessary part of the creative process. We have to see where our ideas take us and to allow our intuition some say in this stage. It is a lot of work, this preparation stage—all the brainstorming and research we can do to find solutions to whatever problem we are trying to solve, and staying open to changing how we have done things and finding new and better ways.

Wallas's second stage, *incubation*, is when we walk away from a problem and do not think about it consciously. We may be thinking about or focusing on something else while our preparation works behind the scenes in our minds. Pauses in creative work are a necessary step in the process; Goleman and Kaufman (1992) describe this incubation as letting "the problem simmer" when pauses are necessary because

[T]he unconscious mind is far more suited to creative insight than the conscious mind. Ideas are free to recombine with other ideas in novel patterns and unpredictable associations. ... [T]he unconscious speaks to us in ways that go beyond words, including the rich feelings and deep imagery of the senses. (para. 6)

Wallas's third stage, *illumination*, is when the magic of creativity happens: This is the lightbulb moment. Possibilities and solutions and answers to questions come to us sometimes in a flash during or after incubation. According to Goleman and Kaufman (1992), "This is the popular stage—the one that usually gets all the glory and attention, the moment that people sweat and long for, the feeling "This is it!" (para. 8). Although this is the stage that gets all the glory, it is the previous and following stages that allow the actual magic to happen.

The fourth stage, according to Wallas, is *verification*, because although we may have flashes of brilliance, we still need to see how the idea works in action, how to make it actually useful (Goleman & Kaufman, 1992). And maybe what you thought was a flash of brilliance is actually a creative idea, but it does not quite solve the problem you are working on. This is when convergent thinking is required to integrate and evaluate all of the strange and divergent ideas that came to us during our preparation or illumination stages, and this verification stage may take a lot of time and work—the dirty work, really, of figuring out the details of how to make an idea work in a specific class.

Wallas (1926/2014) writes that in our everyday thinking, the four stages of *preparation*, *incubation*, *illumination*, and *verification* are constantly overlapping each other as we consider various challenges. As an ESL teacher, do you have the time, or do you allow yourself the time, for your own creative process to unfold and help you solve problems that come up, to brainstorm and research and test and refine your new ideas in your teaching? All the stages are necessary for real creativity to happen.

### **Creative Habits**

It is clear that a creative process takes time and energy. In addition, to be more effective and creative ESL teachers, it helps to analyze the specific actions and ways of thinking that happen during a creative process. What do truly creative people do during the *preparation* stage, for example, and what does *verification* really look like in practice? For this, we can look to researchers who have done work in visual arts education, exploring how the creative process is enacted in a studio classroom, because it is artists and arts educators who have taught students how to be artists, how to think creatively and participate in the creative process. I have seen firsthand in my own teaching how creative ESL education can benefit from art education, as integration of disciplines can lead to deeper understanding. Efland (2002) writes that "[I]f the aim of education is to fully activate the cognitive potential of the learner, ways have to be found to integrate knowledge from many subjects to achieve a fuller understanding than would be

provided by content treated in isolation“ (p. 103). It must be said that education should fully activate the cognitive potential of the *teacher* as well as the students. In the art of teaching ESL, teachers are also always learners. If a student can learn to engage in the creative process to make visual art, an English language teacher can engage in the process to develop the performance art of facilitating effective learning. Hetland et al.'s (2013) *Studio Thinking* approach, a result of research done with Project Zero, part of Harvard's Graduate School of Education (“PZ,” 2015), identifies eight studio habits or cognitive/attitudinal dispositions that art students develop in successful visual arts classes. These habits, which I will refer to as creative habits from here forward, can be used “to bring artful thought and attitudes to bear on real-world problems and projects, both in arts classrooms and across the curriculum” (Hetland et al., p. v). By identifying and understanding these habits, ESL teachers can better see and apply them in their own creative teaching processes. The eight creative habits are:

1. Observe.
2. Understand the TESOL world/community.
3. Envision.
4. Stretch and explore.
5. Express.
6. Engage and persist.
7. Reflect.
8. Develop craft.

To illustrate my own engagement in the creative process and to describe what these eight creative habits look like in action in an ESL class, I will use an example of one section of a lesson from my high-intermediate reading-writing-grammar class. My graduate students, most of whom come from China and other Asian countries, need to solidify their understanding of some complex grammar rules, especially for academic reading and writing. Our class meets once a week for three hours and our curriculum includes reading articles related to their studies (Art Education, Fine Arts painting and sculpture, and Jewelry and Metal Arts), and summary, response, and academic essay writing. Framing activities as challenges for students to solve collaboratively, with space for playfulness within the language structures, and incorporation of my own and my students' interests (both art/design-related and otherwise) have been my own overarching goals. With all of this in mind, I engaged in my own creative process to come up with a grammar activity called the “Red Panda Sentence Game.”

Before the class in which I introduced my Red Panda Sentence

Game for the first time, my students and I had reviewed most of the verb tenses and had studied compound and complex sentence structures. My objective for the grammar review that day was to spend about 30 minutes putting the verb tenses and sentence structures together in a fun, meaning-focus-first and form-focus-second writing activity, in preparation for using the forms in their written summaries and responses to an article.

The *preparation* stage of my creative process for the Red Panda Sentence Game included the creative habits of observation, understanding the TESOL world, reflection, stretching and exploring, and engaging and persisting in order to develop my craft. I had observed my students in previous lessons and saw that they needed more practice using the grammar structures in context because although they had “learned” all of them before, and had probably reviewed them countless times through the years, they continued to make verb tense and sentence structure mistakes and still did not always understand why. Many of them were not very motivated to do the necessary grammar practice, a typical situation in many language classes in which I have taught. I did various kinds of research to understand the TESOL world/community and gather ideas about fun grammar activities and creative teaching and learning. I looked online, read articles and books, and talked to my colleagues to find ideas for different kinds of collaborative grammar games that encouraged creative use of language. For example, one colleague lent me her copy of *Stage by Stage: A Handbook for Using Drama in the Second Language Classroom* (Burke & O’Sullivan, 2002). Another let me look at his copy of *Teaching Grammar in Context* (Weaver, 1996). I was forced to reflect on my own grammar teaching, and I admitted to myself that while I might be a good explainer of the rules with clear examples, good at giving the students plenty of practice in class and for homework, and good at walking them through proofreading to find and correct their own mistakes, what I have struggled with most is how to make it fun and meaningful. Every semester, students suggest we do more games, and I always think, “Oh, that would be nice if we had more time.” With so much to cover in one semester, I had always thought that games were less important than more formal and academic practice. With this attitude, I had not learned many grammar games to use in class, and I did not feel comfortable facilitating them. Even still, I had always heard a little voice reminding me, “You’ve got to give them some time to play with the grammar.” Therefore, I was forced to stretch and explore, to try something new in my class. I liked the drama and literature recommended in the books I referenced, but none of the suggestions seemed quite right for my class. Engaging and persisting was im-

portant because I could not find any game that seemed to fit the needs of that specific class, so my challenge was to create one of my own.

The *incubation* stage for me is when I leave work unfinished, so I am not actively lesson planning, yet in the back of my mind I know I still have a problem to solve. Envisioning and expressing are the creative habits I use during incubation. In the case of the Red Panda Sentence Game, my husband and I were talking about a major snowstorm that had recently swept through the Midwest, and he had shown me a photo of the red pandas at the Cincinnati Zoo (Sieczkowski, 2015). I love animals and was tickled by how much fun the pandas were having in their cold white world. Later, as I was taking a walk, a time when I often return to mull over all kinds of challenges in my life, including teaching, the thought came to me that I could show my students the photo of the red pandas because maybe they would have seen them in Asia, and they might even be able to share some more information about the pandas with me. Some simple envisioning happened at this point, although I still had not connected the pandas to my grammar lesson challenge. Although I was not actively creating my teaching, I was focusing on expressing, thinking about a way in which I could bring my own love of animals into the class and ask for my students to share what they knew about the topic, to express themselves.

That night, as I was lying in bed before falling asleep, another typical time for me to return to the *preparation* stage, to reflect and envision, stretch and explore, and engage in thinking about my teaching by playing with new ideas in a very loose, divergent way, I thought about lower-level writing classes I had taught in the past, and how I had cut up sentences from a paragraph for the students to reassemble in groups in order to see the paragraph organization. I remembered that asking students to physically manipulate sentences on strips of paper was an engaging change of pace. And those cut-up sentences reminded me of “magnetic poetry.” (We all know the sometimes quirky, sometimes stupid, and sometimes intriguing poems that can come out of playing around on a fridge with unexpected combinations of words.) And this is where I entered the *illumination* stage of my creative process.

The *illumination* stage was not logical: It is not that I was even trying to solve my uninspiring grammar lesson challenge; I was just letting my mind wander and as it did, the red pandas and magnetic poetry came together as a possible way to engage my students in using both verb tenses and various sentences structures. It felt fun to me, and I literally thought to myself, “This is a great idea!” I had to get up out of bed and write down a few notes so as to be sure I would not forget in the morning.

The *translation* stage began the next day when I had to engage and persist and envision again to solidify my late-night bright idea. When I got to work, I took out my lesson plan, the one with the big empty space in the grammar-practice slot. Before writing, I envisioned how I might introduce the Red Panda Sentence Game—with a video clip of the pandas rolling around in the snow, and a brief discussion about what my students knew about pandas, as well as what they knew about the weather at that time in different parts of the country. Then I imagined how I could group the students, who sit at large tables, which makes for easy groups of four. I was mentally stretching and exploring to figure out how exactly I would organize the game, giving each group a couple of minutes to write a sentence using a verb and time word I gave them and letting them choose their own subjects and objects. I decided to have them create five sentences with five different verbs and five different time words (*jump* and *already*, for example, and *frolic* and *for three hours*). I decided that the final challenge for five minutes would be to combine as many of the sentences as they logically could using connecting words from a list in their textbooks (see Appendix A). Based on my experience with effective group work, what I had already done to develop my craft, and using my understanding of my class that semester, especially that they needed some guidance so that all the students could actively participate in the game, I decided to ask the students to use group-work roles and language (see Appendix B), choosing one note taker, a grammar checker, a meaning checker to make sure each sentence's idea was unique and clear, and last, a speaker to tell each sentence to the class. I noted all of these ideas in my lesson plan. (For details about how to do this activity, see Appendix C.)

The next day in class, the *translation* continued as I had to actually try out my new Red Panda Sentence Game with my students. It is in class, when we are doing something new, that our creative process culminates in art, ideally creating a space for flow, in which teacher and students are engaged in a challenging and enjoyable activity, using language to reach a meaningful goal. Flow, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) writes,

is [when] a person is challenged to do her best, and must constantly improve her skills. At the time, she doesn't have the opportunity to reflect on what it means in terms of the self. ... But afterward, when the activity is over and the self-consciousness has a chance to resume, the self that the person reflects upon is not the same self that existed before the flow experience: it is now enriched by new skills and fresh achievements. (p. 65)

I cannot say if each student in my class entered the “flow state.” I was delighted to talk to them about the red pandas and the intense winter weather outside our mild California city, hear about what they knew and thought, and to veer away from “boring” grammar so that they could play with language to create accurate and meaningful sentences, and I saw that they all seemed engaged. Meanwhile, they created funny and original sentences, which were often grammatically correct, for example, “The two pandas have already been frolicking in the snow for three hours.” And “Lin already jumped over her brother.” For the last challenge, when they had to combine their sentences into longer compound-complex sentences, their combinations were quite humorous and used advanced grammar, such as “The red panda was drinking milk yesterday before she and her brother climbed up the Himalayan mountain this morning; in addition, they are tired now since they have been frolicking in the snow for three hours.” When the students wrote this sentence on the board for their classmates to see, the whole class proofread it together and found a grammar error that even I had missed when they just read it aloud. This is where the improvisation of teaching and learning appeared: I had planned to have the students write their sentences on paper to check the grammar in their own groups, but when it came to reading them aloud, the longer sentences were too complicated for the class to follow orally, so I decided on the spot to have the students write them on the board. This allowed us as a group to proofread the verb tenses and sentence structures together. I was probably observing and reflecting to make adjustments, but it happened naturally without a lot of conscious thought, since I myself was in the flow. Richards also emphasizes that in addition to being knowledgeable, creative teachers have to be adept at this kind of improvisation to “modify their teaching during lessons” (2013, p. 13). As he also mentions, this can feel risky, yet risk taking is another essential element of creativity. The more we practice it as teachers, and the more experience we have, the more we can trust ourselves to respond to our learners’ needs on the spot, as I had to do for implementation of my grammar game.

Ultimately, this was a fun grammar activity that ended up requiring closer to 45 minutes than the planned 30 minutes, yet the time was well spent as it gave the students the opportunity to be creative, to play with words, while practicing using the correct grammar. Developing this activity, developing my craft, required me to be creative, from preparation through illumination, incubation, and translation, using my eight creative habits of observation, reflection, stretching and exploration, engaging and persisting, expressing my own interest in animals and belief that learning English grammar can be fun

and immediately useful, and it could not have been done without my background knowledge of the field of TESOL.

Are the eight creative habits actions and ways of thinking that you often engage in as a teacher? They are central to learning in many subjects, used in many academic arenas, as well as in everyday life, can be used in a circular or cyclical way, are dynamic and interactive, and unfold in creative experiences (Hetland et al., 2013). The art of teaching requires teachers to continually engage in our own creative learning process. As ESL teachers, to enhance the art of our teaching and our own creativity in our teaching processes, we can learn from what creative artists do. Engaging in the creative process and the eight habits are what art students are encouraged to develop in the art class. To develop our creative teaching, ESL teachers can take on the role of the art student, one who is continually learning how to be more creative and use his or her creativity to make and do something very useful (teaching and learning).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

I believe that if ESL teachers are deeply committed to developing their craft and becoming more effective facilitators of language learning, we must recognize our creativity, the art of what we do, and strive to be more creative. To do so, we can analyze and evaluate our own teaching processes to understand what we do that encourages our own creativity and how we engage in the eight creative habits, the skills and actions within a successful creative process. Creative ESL teachers do not automatically succeed in every lesson, not every activity is creative and effective, nor does everything we do help our students gain language skills and enhance their own creativity. Can we admit when we and our students are not as successful as we had hoped? As Malsbary writes in her work on teachers as creative designers, we have to allow ourselves the humility to recognize when we do not know something, and we have to be willing to “consistently tinker” with our craft (2015, p. 22). What truly creative ESL teachers do is continue to engage in the creative teaching process, continuing to refine and improve our teaching, reflect and reimagine and try again, and be truly present with our students to help them meet their needs and engage in their own creative learning processes. What we learn to understand and do well as teachers, we can promote in our students for them to more effectively and creatively learn and use language. The result can be periods of flow that both teachers and students can experience, promoting enjoyment and meaningful language education that allows us as teachers to continue to improve how we teach and allows students to use language skills in the myriad ways they need today and will need in the



future. They will not have memorized only rules and vocabulary and structures; they will have learned how to think creatively and critically to solve problems, and, this is very important, because of the pleasure of using and growing their language skills, they will be motivated to continue using them and learning.

As readers may have realized in engaging in the creative process and using creative habits, it all takes time, resources, and collaboration. It takes time and energy for teachers to think deeply about what is working and not working so well in each lesson, time to brainstorm new activities and create new materials, time to imagine how we will work and foresee rough spots and make revisions to our plans, time and energy to teach and then continue to reflect for future classes. It takes time for solutions to percolate, to bounce ideas around with our colleagues. This time and energy require our attention and commitment. In addition, if we are not paid for prep time, or if we teach too many classes, or if we have too many students in our classes, growing our creativity is more difficult, if not impossible. This is where administrators and leaders of educational institutions are essential in helping to promote a culture of better and more creative education. If creative ESL teaching and learning are priorities, teachers' schedules, class sizes, and pay have to reflect the time and energy required. Teachers need to feel supported in their efforts at experimentation to meet the needs of our students in creative ways (Malsbary, 2015). We all need to work together, take the time to meet, brainstorm, and plan and encourage the implementation of creative teaching and learning.

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**Appendix A**  
**Combining Sentences With Conjunctions**

| <i>Relationship</i> | <i>Coordinators<br/>(aka fanboys)</i>          | <i>Subordinators</i>   |
|---------------------|--|--|
| Addition            | and<br>nor (when both<br>clauses are negative) |  |
| Contrast            | but<br>yet                                     | although<br>even though<br>though<br>while                                   |
| Cause               | for  | because<br>since   |
| Result and Effect   | so   | so that  |
| Condition           |  | if<br>unless<br>in case<br>provided that                                     |
| Choice              | or   |  |
| Time and Sequence   |  | before<br>after<br>as soon as<br>when<br>while<br>whenever<br>until<br>since |

## Appendix B

### Classroom Language: Group Work

When students work in groups, it is a great time to use English and learn from one another! But since it requires collaboration and coordination, it can be messy and difficult. Below is a description of four jobs so everyone in a group is clear about what to do and how to say it.

#### COORDINATOR

| Responsibilities:   | Language:   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keeps group members working on the task</li> <li>• Makes sure all the members participate</li> <li>• Watches the time</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Okay! Let's get started!</li> <li>o Okay, everybody! Let's stay on track!</li> <li>o We have gone off track, guys. Let's get back on track.</li> <li>o Does everybody agree?</li> <li>o This time is almost up!</li> <li>o We only have two minutes left, so let's ...</li> <li>o The time is up!</li> </ul> |

#### WRITER

| Responsibilities:  | Language:  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writes down the group's ideas and answers to questions</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Can you repeat that?</li> <li>o Can you spell that?</li> <li>o Can you explain that more clearly?</li> <li>o I can't hear you. Can you speak more loudly?</li> <li>o Wait a minute. I need to write this all down!</li> </ul> |

## SPEAKER

| Responsibilities:   | Language:  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizes the group's answers into a quick presentation</li> <li>• Stands in front of the class and presents the group's ideas to the whole class</li> </ul> | <p>During Group Work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Okay, we only have a little time left. What am I going to say?!</li> <li>o What should I say about ... ?</li> <li>o What are the key points of what we want to say?</li> <li>o What are the key examples do you think I should explain?</li> </ul> <p>Reporting to the Class:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Can I have your attention, please?</li> <li>o Our group decided that ...</li> <li>o In our opinion ...</li> <li>o We think that ...</li> </ul> |

## CHECKER

| Responsibilities:  | Language:   |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Checks the grammar in the writer's notes</li> <li>• Checks the grammar of the language written on the board</li> <li>• Checks the pronunciation of what the speaker will say</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o I think the grammar/spelling/pronunciation is not right. I think it should be ...</li> <li>o Let me look in the dictionary to see how to pronounce this word correctly.</li> <li>o I think you need to add an "-s" / "-ed" to the end of this word.</li> <li>o Is this the right verb tense here? I think we should use ...</li> </ul> |

### Language for Choosing Group Work Jobs

- § Who wants to be the {writer, speaker, coordinator, checker}?
- § Who is good at {writer, speaker, coordinator, checker}?
- § Could you be the {writer, speaker, coordinator, checker}?
- § Can I be the {writer, speaker, coordinator, checker}?
- § Sorry, I really don't want to be the {writer, speaker, coordinator, checker} today because \_\_\_\_\_.
- § I was the {writer, speaker, coordinator, checker} last time, so \_\_\_\_\_.

## Appendix C

### ESL Verb Tense and Sentence-Combining Grammar Activity “Red Panda Sentence Game”

**Objective:** Use various verb tenses, time words, and sentence structures (simple, compound, complex) with conjunctions to create sentences about the red pandas in the snow

**Level:** Intermediate-Advanced

**Time:** 30-45 minutes

**Materials:** Internet connection and TV/projector, whiteboard, whiteboard markers, pens and paper, classroom language group work role cards (see Appendix B)

Instructions for the teacher

1. Before doing this activity, students should have studied all of the verb tenses: present and past simple, present and past continuous, and present perfect and present perfect continuous, as well as sentence structures: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex using coordinators and subordinators.  
\*The game can be modified to use fewer tenses and sentence structures (see prompts below)  
\*It is also helpful to have used group work role cards before, or take some time to explain the roles and duties before the game (see Appendix B).
2. Begin by showing your students pictures or video of the red pandas at the Cincinnati Zoo playing in the snow (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSehQsYU9h4>)
  - Ask them schema-building questions: Have you seen pandas or red pandas before? Where do they originally come from? Where is Cincinnati? How does the winter weather compare to where we are, and to your native country? What are the pandas doing?
3. Introduce the game: Tell the students they are going to work in groups and the first part of the game is to write four sentences about the pandas. You will give them a verb and time word to use for each sentence, and they will have two minutes to write each sentence, for a total of four rounds and four sentences. Their goal is to write interesting and accurate sentences using

the given verbs and time words. An additional fifth round (sentence combining) will be explained later.

4. Group the students in groups of four. Give each student in a group one role card and quickly review what each role's responsibilities are (see Classroom Language: Group Work in Appendix B). Each group needs to write its sentences on one piece of paper and the speaker should be ready to read the sentence aloud after each round.
5. On the board, write the first-round verb and time word: *frolic, for three hours*. Ask students if they know the verb frolic and clarify (to play) if necessary. Give the groups two minutes to write their sentences. Time two minutes. When time is up, ask each group's speaker to read the group's sentence aloud. Other groups should listen for correct verb tense. Each group gets a point for a correct sentence.
6. Repeat for rounds 2-4 with verbs and time words.

*2-drink, yesterday*

*3-jump, already*

*4-climb, this morning*

7. Introduce the final round. Students have five minutes in their groups to combine as many of their sentences as possible into one compound-complex sentence, using conjunctions from the list (see Appendix A).
8. After five minutes, each group's writer writes the sentences on the board and the speaker reads it aloud. The whole class checks for accuracy. Groups get one point for correct grammar, and the class votes on the most interesting sentence. That team gets one point. Total all the points for rounds 1-5 to find the winning team.



