



ORIGINAL PAPER

Challenging Creativity in Business English Classes

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Abstract:

Teaching Business English is intimidating for the inexperienced teacher because of the huge quantity of professional terms that need to be introduced in the lesson and of the difficulty to grasp the real meaning and use in various contexts. Numerous materials and textbooks which have recently appeared on the market due to the globalization of the business world are extremely useful and seem to offer great support, facilitating the teacher's work and creating a feeling of comfort and relief. In fact, it is a matter of teaching students to deepen their language skills in order to use them successfully in business contexts, not about teaching Economics in English. However, at a certain moment, students may get used to the comfort of being “trapped” in this “business English routine” and may react surprisingly when asked to get out of this warm atmosphere. Students in business are not mentally structured to explore their imaginative skills; they are rather centered on the practical side of the issues they have to solve. Therefore, learning how to think outside the box is a matter of effort and dedication. For the teacher, it is mainly a struggle to make students understand the importance of developing the creative aspect, of generating original and exciting ideas. It's not common to demand creativity from technical English students but it's surely a challenge which needs to be dealt with great care. The present paper is about attempting to exceed some limits and see the reactions and feedback.

Keywords: *creativity; business; limits; challenge; opportunity.*

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Creativity- definition of the concept

Creativity is a large term which includes special skills and features that a person possesses. It refers to the ability to produce ideas and generate solutions to problems by following the inner thoughts. According to Xerri & Vassallo, "being creative means daring to do things differently, thus expanding the boundaries of what we know about teaching and learning in order to discover new worlds within the confines of our classroom". (Xerri & Vassallo, 2000: 3). Creativity is basically the ability to cross the limits of our reasoning and enter the realm of imagination.

Is Creativity Important in Business English Classes?

Creativity is such a difficult concept to consider in the current technological world and pattern of education. In the case of Business English students, it is even harder to imagine since learners' main interests are especially related to well-defined objectives that are realistic and quite well specified. Business students are focused on developing language skills that would offer them the chance to become successful communicators in business contexts such as: telephoning, meetings, emails, memos, reports and s.o, skills that would meet the expectations of the actual business world. It is no wonder that the English teacher is somehow bound to conceive a course that would apply to the needs of the learners relying on authentic materials and situations that are adapted and connected to the present labor market. The English teacher needs to adopt a professional approach, working on mastering a wide range of skills and techniques. Just as Swiggett concludes : "it is the function of business English to be "business like," i.e., to issue orders, to state facts, to communicate decisions, to report actions. The chief ends therefore to be aimed at in business English are: (1) Objectivity in presentation of facts. The elimination of the personal, the subjective, the bias of wish; in short, the imaginative light (...) which has no place in a businesslike presentation of fact. (2) Accuracy of statement. (...) Business English requires clearness of definition, sharpness of outline, distinctness of detail. (3) Precision of form. (...) Business English must be compact, precise, concise. (...) In Business English there is no room for the play of idiosyncrasy of expression (...)." (Swiggett, 1922: 9)

There is not much room for creativity in such a realistic oriented class; better said there is a narrow path for imagination that could be used, but, following it, requires a great deal of effort and involvement from the part of the teacher; moreover, students need to find a certain amount of satisfaction and enjoyment in order to be ready to become part of a creative practical task.

Although creativity seems to be a point of interest for Humanistic students, it is of vital importance for technical students as well. Developing a sense of creativity is not as easy as it seems, it needs practice to stimulate creative thinking and exercise to identify solutions to problems. Stimulating imagination at the right point and time will lead to a positive attitude and will foster future implication and courage to express opinions, conceptions, personal thoughts, etc. Developing it, may enhance their ability to be open-minded in their future careers (accepting and generating ideas), to analyze situations, to provide multiple solutions to problems which may arise, to structure business plans in an appropriate way and to formulate relevant questions and answers. Companies generally look for people who can come up with new perspectives and can stimulate the employees with a modern mentality and a fresh attitude.

The teacher is the one that plays the main role in generating imaginative tasks. He/she is the “manager” of his/her own class. He/she cannot pretend students to be creative in the class unless he/she is prone to be creative. Gregerson, Snyder&Kaufman point out that: “(...) teachers who want to enhance creativity in their students should serve as role models. In this way, the definition of creative assignments from the perspective of the teacher is important. I try to model creative thinking in my development of assignments in multiple ways, such as by being flexible and open to new ideas, taking risks and “thinking outside the box”. (Gregerson & Snyder & Kaufman, 2013: 171).

However, being a highly imaginative teacher is not enough to stir the students’ interest. A teacher should be well prepared in advance, should have confidence in himself/herself and at the same time generate confidence among students. One relevant step is to organize everything carefully, by selecting enjoyable activities and providing good explanations regarding the target that should be attained.

Interesting materials accompanied by a proper method of approach can lead to an increase of interest and may be engaging for students. Once they discover the beauty of creativity, they will be more than willing to be get involved and may even come with their own suggestions, thus contributing to the design of the lesson. Creativity is a matter of practice; the more you exercise, the better you become. It may appear impossible, at least at the beginning, to come up with ideas, solutions and imaginative skills but, in time, business students can learn how to deal with such situations. They may discover the bright side of such tasks and may use their intelligence to provide excellent answers. Even later on in their work life, business people will be more than eager to be involved in all kinds of activities that will put their mind to contribution. Regardless of the level of difficulty of the tasks, they will never step back in front of a new and fresh activity. The key obstacle is to overcome the embarrassing aspects of not mastering the language properly or the fear of being laughed at. Once they surpass it, they will embrace the opportunity with great enthusiasm. After all, business people are used to being in control of things and they will prove their abilities to master the unpredictable. Ellis Johnson emphasized that:

“used to being in control and making decisions, senior managers will probably take an assertive role in their own training. Most will be confident but if they feel that their language skills are relatively poor, they may be somewhat sensitive and embarrassed on this point. As intelligent people, they will not wish to be talked down to, given activities which seem facile, or given materials that lack credibility. The approach that will work best with most senior managers is to enable them to demonstrate their expertise by giving them the opportunity to explain what happens in their company, to express their own ideas, and to discuss problems at a high conceptual level. They will want to be challenged by tasks which are demanding and require imagination”. (Ellis & Johnson, 1994: 58).

Reasons for Introducing Creativity to Business English Students

a) enhance fluency development

The central point for introducing creativity to business English students is to generate fluency in the sense of using the language in an corresponding way when working in a team. Fluency is mainly connected to speech but writing is also included. It is one of the central targets of any learner and it is a hardworking, complex and long term process. It develops gradually and requires patience and practice. Just as in the case

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of children, there is a tight link between speaking and writing and fluency in writing may be performed by speaking first. Research has shown that: “the relationship between talk and writing has been demonstrated repeatedly, showing that both underachievers and high achievers benefit from opportunities to talk before, during and after writing.(...)Through talk at the initial stages of the writing process, children generate and share ideas, playfully experiment with options and capture, shape and consider what it is they might want to say. (...)Furthermore, through developing confidence in playful and creative oral contexts, children learn to take risks with ideas, words and images, and this supports their fluency with ideas and enables them to make more divergent connections. Improvisation and playful engagement play a largely unrecognised role in the compositional process, and yet they are the heart of developing creatively in writing.” (Cremin & Reedy & Bearne & Dombey, 2015: 88)

When it comes to business students, besides oral practice, listening may also be used as a tool of generating fluent writing; the teacher may play a listening material about a company employee who describes a pie chart or a graph regarding the sales of the company. On the basis of the audio script, students are handed key expressions which are generally used in such situations and the stages of the presentation; divided into pairs, students may be asked to present a slide to his/her partner paying attention to the previously given information. Hence, students know they have to follow a certain path by inserting the notions acquired; however, this way they are unconsciously directed towards fluent speech but also towards creativity since they are stimulated to add their own chunks of sentences. Fluent and creative writing could be generated by providing similar visual materials on which students are supposed to produce presentations. Presentations, whether oral or written require a great deal of creativity because they need to be adapted to the needs of one particular customer, to provide explanations and to motivate them.

Thus, the materials which are used to generate creative ideas may include certain expressions which are meant to widen the vocabulary knowledge and may stimulate the students to place them in various contexts. Such contexts may also be provided as a visual and audio support before proceeding to the actual imaginative situation. In the case of business, they may be in the form of phone conversations, case studies, presentations, negotiations, etc. Moreover, business cultural aspects should be part of the English lessons since business people travel a lot these days and have to attend online meetings with people from all over the world; getting familiarized with the cultural differences will support them in adopting a correct professional attitude and will prevent them from making cultural mistakes.

b) stimulates teamwork and develops leadership skills

Teaching business students to cope with their imaginative skills in pairs or groups, will develop their strategic skills of working in a team and will lead to a better understanding of each other’s needs; it also helps to consolidate relationships and to do networking. This type of interaction is beneficial for increasing self-confidence and make others become confident. On the other hand, some students may find out that they possess leadership skills and may try to guide the group towards achieving success. Putting their mind to contribution in order to generate constructive and smart ideas will sharp their instincts of managing an activity.

However, not all participants in the class may find the creative exercises attractive. Being somehow more tempted to assign a practical side to the tasks they have to accomplish, they will reject the idea from the start. They can come up with all sorts of

excuses such as the lack of interesting ideas or the boring aspect of having to conceive something which is not of any particular interest to them or that they cannot see the real efficiency of the exercise. Therefore, before proceeding to the activities, the teacher should think of ways to attract and stimulate active participation. He/she is the center of the teaching process, he/she is the voice of the class, the leader of the groups, the coordinator of everything that happens during the lesson. The tone of the voice, his/her expressiveness and clarity when giving instructions, the stress, the accent, proper encouragement and positive approach of the imaginative topic are just a part of the behavior features which diminish the level of stress in class.

It is also highly vital for the teacher to adapt the content of the English book or to come up with additional resources which could offer the possibility to practise creativity. Sticking to the information which could be found in the pages of the lesson will not be useful and will leave the students the impression of a “mechanical” act of teaching; they will get used to it and any further attempt to cross the limits of the coursebook will take the students out of their comfort zone and will make them feel reluctant to speak. Thus, coursebooks should be used only to support the teaching act and should frequently be accompanied by extra materials. As the subsequent website points out: “Most language teachers still rely on coursebooks to provide the activities they will use in the classroom and most coursebooks do not typically provide activities which foster creativity (<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/ideas-using-coursebook-creatively>). It is therefore important that teachers make use of their coursebook as a resource rather than follow it as a script and they develop the confidence, awareness and creativity to adapt coursebooks activities in ways which can foster creativity”.

The advantages of using creativity in classes are more than just expressing ideas and raising the freedom of expression; it’s about collaboration with classmates, integration and adaptability. The entertaining side is an additional “bonus” which redresses stress and contributes to a pleasant classroom environment. Accordingly, Kulkarni mentions that: “Creativity is something which has originality in thinking and implementation of its ideas in action. In simple words, it is a logical and disciplined process of rationalizing, evaluating, analyzing the given information or a situation. (...) Benefits of creativity are excellent team building and team work, increased engagement and interaction, improved ability to attract attention, increased fun, happiness and sense of achievement.” (Kulkarni, 2020: 108).

Unfavorable Aspects for Creativity

a) The number of students in the class could be problematic for a teacher no matter the type of materials intended to be taught. Outnumbered classes, or, on the contrary, small size classes are a real issue for activities which are connected to creativity. However, having the right number of students in the class is, in most cases, difficult to achieve. The main drawback of numerous participants is the difficulty to coordinate them and to offer the same amount of attention. Working in big groups also means less participation for some members and restrictive time to expose their ideas. Some students in the class may find the idea of taking part in activities which involve imagination, discouraging. They may feel the pressure of having to produce more than they are ready to do, of having the eyes of the teacher on them and they may give up on collaborating from the start.

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Another aspect to be taken into consideration is the students' focus on preparing for the final exam. Business students expect to receive practical tests based on business notions and less on the creative side. Their principal point of interest is when the teacher points out notions that will be part of the exam and that could help them obtain high marks. Such an attitude could really prevent them from exploring their imaginative skills when handed in a task of such type. Lessons which strictly rely on exam topics will "kill" all productive ideas and will only support the mechanical acquisition of the language. It would be a sort of a "technical" approach of language teaching that could lead to an automatic acquisition of the language. In this sense, language acquisition is no longer a flexible process, but a rather "stiff" one whose main goal is "practicability".

"Techno" teachers enjoy great appreciation when it comes to the new generations. Technology is a wonderful way of transferring knowledge into a world full of colors, sound and adventure. The great adventure of teaching may find its pillars in all the gadgets available on the market: laptops, tablets, projectors, smart boards, etc and in the great variety of online resources: educational podcasts, blogs, technological applications. Traditional English classes are no longer a viable source of information for the young students who are in touch with technology all the time. Still, technology mustn't be perceived as an instrument designed to replace the teacher. It has to be seen as a creative tool conceived to facilitate the teaching act and enhance students learning process in an easier and funnier modality. It brings authentic situations closer to the learners and creates a tight connection between the teacher and the students who are familiarized with computer skills and eager to use them on all occasions. For teachers, technology means power and freedom to put into practice their knowledge in such a way that students become attracted to the lessons and understand the positive side and benefits of it. Basically speaking: "it's important to remember that technology is just a tool. It can be an important tool that can have a major positive impact on language learning, but great teaching and learning can certainly happen without it. In fact, like any other tool, its effect depends on how it's used (...) as a way to reinforce what has already been learned, as a strategic vehicle through which to heighten student engagement, as a way to help students develop and deepen face-to-face relationships, can result (...) in significant student learning gains. If it is viewed, as a (...) time for teachers to do prep work (...) or as an opportunity to get by without thinking through a lesson plan, then it can actually result in a negative learning impact". (Ferlazzo&Sypniewski, 2012: 266)

A current tendency, which is more and more commonly met, is that of studying English just to have a better employment prospect. Business students are more interested in mastering the language skills which are requested on the labor market and tend to leave aside the pleasure of simply acquiring a new language and using it in other contexts which are not connected to the workplace.

Following the strict line of a coursebook, teachers become limited when it comes to creativity. Choosing to do that will make students obey the structure of the lessons and "be afraid" to exceed its boundaries. The teacher cannot foster creativity if he/she is not a creative person.

b)The noise inside or around the class is the first factor to hinder creativity. No matter how powerful the sound may be, it is a stress matter that will affect productivity in the class. Creativity under such circumstances is out of the question. Sometimes it is impossible to predict such a situation. It may happen for the teacher to prepare an activity related to imagination and creativity and to be impossible to put it into practice

because of people working in construction somewhere close to the class or some repair works done inside the building. External noise is an unfortunate event and not much can be done about it but to always have additional materials to overcome such an embarrassing situation. When it comes to the noise inside the class, there are all sorts of ideas and solutions that could be used to keep the students focused and active. In this case, the teacher has the power in his/her hands to stop sound pollution. One possible disturbance factor may be the use of mobile phones, which could distract attention, students who are late for classes or those who ask for the permission to leave the classroom for different reasons. Eating or drinking something during activities represent another potential disturbance elements.

c) Misconceptions. Removing misconceptions of the type: “I am not good at initiating a conversation”, “I am not capable of imagining things”, “I cannot talk in front of my classmates”, “I don’t have a good English level”, etc. is a crucial element before initiating any creative activity. Low self-esteem will diminish and even “cancel” the success of the teacher’s proposition. In the case of Business English students who are not used to spending time performing imaginative tasks, this negative perspective is, unfortunately, quite common and not easy to solve. The teacher needs to prove flexibility in delivering tasks, softness in voice and action; clear explanations, new ideas, a correct distribution of students in groups, a well sketched strategy, open mindedness with regard to the students’ thoughts are only some of the qualities that could help students remove mental barriers and plunge into the realm of imagination.

Creative Activities in Business Classes

Although, creativity doesn’t seem to play a significant role in the business environment, it is present in a great deal of situations. Teachers should be aware that developing student’s creativity during the English class will be extremely useful for their future careers. It is well-known that: “In the economic and labour market contexts (...) creativity generally refers to “coming up with new ideas and solutions. Creativity is about producing new business solutions , new companies and new technical solutions”. (Lancrin, S. V., Gonzales-Sancho, C., Bouckaert, M., Fernandez Barrerra, M., Jacotin. G., Urgel, J., Vidal, Q., 2019:54)

Creativity is, in fact, the ability to produce new ideas and solutions to problems. It is about the courage to look for other perspectives, to evaluate the novelty of the selected solution, to foresee its outcome. Critical thinking is a different concept which is meant to assess ideas or solutions. It is about multiple perspectives of the same business issue, about suppositions and alternatives. Both creativity and critical should be part of the teaching process because the former contributes to teaching students how to come up with new ideas or products while the latter is centered on expressing judgment on a particular aspect.

Business students need to have in view that creativity and critical thinking are present in the business environment at all levels and they should be willing to “educate” their mind to respond positively to these challenges which are meant to enhance deeper expertise in their field of knowledge as well as deeper learning. Therefore, it is common practice for :“creative managers to regularly conduct brainstorming sessions with their teams to develop new ideas. Beforehand, it has to be made absolutely clear that such meetings proceed devoid of restrictions, negativity, assessments and criticism.” (VV.AA, 2000:15)

There is a wide range of activities which could be inserted along the English lessons and that could foster creativity but, just as in the above mentioned quotation,

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they have to be exercised in a “safe” environment. Better said, mistakes should be approached with a “soft” attitude in such a way that they are perceived as a chance for improvement and progress, not as a failure. Once this condition is fulfilled the teacher can proceed to the initiation of the activities: On <https://www.teflcourse.net> there are mentioned seven ways of transforming the English class into an interactive one, exercising creativity and having fun at the same time: negotiations (students role play a negotiation having some lists with demands and concessions), telephone call role-plays (on different topics) , yearly comparison information gap (students are handed some sheets of paper containing information about the performance of the company during the current year and the previous year; both sides have some information gaps which can be filled in on the basis of the questions they ask), business diaries-arranging a meeting (students are given different diaries with appointments for the following week and they have to formulate questions to find a common free period of time when they can meet), Dragon’s Den/Shark Tank (some students are offered sheets of paper with descriptions of newly invented products on the market and others receive question sheets where a certain amount of money is written in order to play the role of investors; in turns they have to pitch their products and to ask questions to decide which is the best product to invest money in), tell me about your company (the teacher distributes some brochures which contain information about a company and students rely on it to describe it) and analyzing charts and graphs (students get charts and graphs from the teacher and after analyzing them, they have to present them to their classmates by pointing out the trends).

Students who, despite the encouragement of the teacher and peers, can’t spot a different perspective on a given situation may be guided by following some tips. In Macmillan life skills ([***www. macmillanenglish.com](http://www.macmillanenglish.com)), there are mentioned five skills which could be efficient in becoming more creative in finding solutions to problems:

1) Look around you – is a phase in which you can consider that everything around you is problematic so all the things are seen as challenges; the students are stimulated to think of questions about all the objects around them.

2) Avoid traps along the way- this stage refers to having multiple perspectives on an issue and not just stick to one; being flexible in analyzing a situation and making decisions is essential for developing the creative side.

3) Look at causes is, in most cases, more important than the problem itself and, that is because, sometimes, the “root” of a problem may lead to a deeper and more serious problem than the one that is under analysis.

4) Take a step back is recommended in order to get a different angle; “tough” matters require some time to be solved and it is advisable to “delay” a little bit the answer so as to find the most suitable one. Being preoccupied to find a quick clarification, some aspects may be overlooked. It is therefore necessary to take a step back and just have a pause doing something completely different. The period of time spent away from the problem will allow the brain to function better, to obtain a “clearer” view and make a wiser decision.

5) Generate ideas- working in groups is a positive experience because all the members may bring their contribution; it is obvious that not all ideas will be good but none of them should be rejected. Some members may find a source of inspiration in such “weak” ideas for bringing to light interesting reactions.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I strongly believe that developing creativity in the English classes should not be limited to non-technical faculties. On the contrary, teachers should try to make use of any opportunity to set the context for creating a situation which puts the students' imagination at work and develops their sense of "freedom"; "freedom" should not be understood in the concrete sense, that of doing whatever they want in class but in the sense of feeling comfortable to express thoughts and ideas without feeling ashamed to do that; by intervening in debates without thinking of the possibility of being "assessed" by others; by simply taking part in all the activities generated by the teacher not having a slight concern about possible errors or judgment of any kind. It is the teacher's responsibility to correct inappropriate behavior in class or to "put out" conflicts when certain discussions overcome some limits or disagreement appear.

Above all, teachers should "eliminate" the possible misconceptions about creativity. Some students may possess a certain amount of "fear" in speaking their mind, in analyzing a situation, in sharing ideas, etc. This is because there is a tendency to believe that not all people have a creative mind. This is, for sure, an incorrect conception. There is a dose of creativity inside each of us, only that it may manifest in different directions or in various contexts. However, with a little bit of practice, students may discover and develop their sense of creativity. In conclusion, it is important to be aware of the fact that:

"All pupils have creative abilities and their creativity takes a wide variety of forms. Each individual has a wide range of ideas, perceive things in a personal way and, at times, shows insight and inventiveness. Some pupils demonstrate high levels of creativity in particular areas (...). Others may be creative in the range and quality of ideas and words that they use in language (...). Some pupils may not be creative in one particular area but show creativity in a range of contexts across the curriculum". (Sheir, A., Alodwan, T., 2010: 53).

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