

Integrating creativity into an English as a foreign language reading classroom

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Abstract

This article describes how creativity is integrated into an English as a foreign language (EFL) reading classroom for a class of adolescent readers in Taiwan. The chosen focal material was a book called *Our Iceberg Is Melting* by John Kotter and Holger Rathgeber, and the four language learning units in which creativity was infused were (1) dramatic reading; (2) watching relevant videos; (3) poster sessions; and (4) writing possible plots for the sequel. Student works were included to showcase students' creativity and how the units were closely connected to language learning. It is hoped that more language teachers will integrate creative elements into their teaching to transform their teaching and classrooms.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Creativity has manifested itself in many different ways in language classrooms (Maley & Peachey, 2015). In reading classrooms, creative language production can take many forms, including, but not limited to, role plays, poster sessions, and reading group discussions (Ferrer & Staley, 2016), and the creative process builds on the pillars of keeping an open mind to observe, explore, and generate outputs together. In this article, I will describe the design of my reading class for a group of adolescents learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in Taiwan.

The reading course was designed for a group of 50 students in Year 1 of the Junior College Division, which is equivalent to the first year of high school with students freshly graduating from junior high schools (the average student age is 14 years old). The chosen focal teaching material was a book called *Our Iceberg Is Melting* written by John Kotter and Holger Rathgeber (2006). It is a fable about a group of penguins in Antarctica trying to adapt to the situation of a melting iceberg. It is also a charming story rich in figurative language as the penguins speak and act like humans. In this course, the book was read not just for surface meaning and reading comprehension; it served as the catalyst for many creative language tasks in four units as described below.

2 | DRAMATIC READING

To prepare students to express themselves with their voices by reading aloud, the book was divided into seven parts. Each student group (between seven and eight students) was responsible for recording a part and to play their audio file to the class. Exemplary dramatic readings (such as Ollie Heath's reading of the classic English picture book *Gruffalo* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThZqDoJi5S0>) were played in the class. After each group played its audio file to the class, I implemented three mini-lessons to address common pronunciation problems—namely, the pronunciation of past tense English verbs, syllable segmentation, and sentence intonation. (I reinforced the pronunciation rules continuously throughout the semester.) I designed a follow-up dramatic reading activity where every group of students had to read and record the same passage taken from *Our Iceberg Is Melting*. The instructor commented on the reading fluency and accuracy of the end products in class and continued to encourage students to practice reading aloud.

3 | WATCHING RELEVANT VIDEOS

As students live in a world rich in multimodal resources, it is essential for language teachers to make the best use of these resources. At the beginning of the semester, I used Paul Nicklen's heart-warming TED talk *Animal Tales From Icy Wonderlands*

(https://www.ted.com/talks/paul_nicklen_tales_of_ice_bound_wonderlands) to introduce students to the Antarctic ice world and generate students' awareness of endangered animals and environments. Nicklen's dedicated work on environmental protection made headlines in mid-December 2017 as his video of a starving polar bear looking for food in a garbage container on the Baffin Island in northern Canada went viral (<https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2017/12/15/starving-polar-bear-video-paul-nicklen-cnni.cnn>). I played this video in class, along with CNN's interview with Nicklen; a depressing atmosphere could immediately be sensed in the classroom, especially after the polar bear eventually collapsed in front of the camera. This shocking yet timely video provided a proper sense of closure to the semester, in addition to reminding the students of the pressing need to become more involved in environmental issues.

After the entire book was read, students watched National Geographic's documentary *Before the Flood*, narrated by the renowned actor Leonardo DiCaprio. After the students watched the documentary, I instructed them, in small groups of three to four, as follows: *Write a letter to Leonardo DiCaprio. Tell him what you've learned from the documentary Before the Flood. Tell him about your favorite (or the most impactful) one or two examples from the movie of either climate change or what we need to do to stop climate change. Also, tell him what you plan to do to make change based on what you learned from the movie. Be sure to include the salutations (greeting and closing).* The students responded this task with enthusiasm probably partly because most of them had watched films by Leonardo DiCaprio. (See the appendix for two original group letters written by students, without any correction other than removing personal information). In addition to going over local-level errors (e.g., word usage and grammar), students' letters also served as a good starting point to teach email etiquette and pragmatics. There were three groups who began the letter with "Dear Leo" and four with "Dear Leonardo DiCaprio." I explained the inappropriateness of these addresses later in class. Before writing their letters, students were not given specific instruction on how to tone their letters because I was curious about how they would approach such a task. Most letters sounded polite and formal. They also showed that the adolescent students were

able to engage the topic of climate change and that they could resonate with materials carefully chosen to cater to their interests and concerns.

4 | POSTER SESSIONS

In their self-selected groups, students used the story as the source of inspiration to draw comic strips and showed them to the class (see Figures 1 and 2). Making the posters allowed students to work together to express themselves creatively through art works. They could also include their own interpretations of the story in their posters.

5 | WHAT HAPPENS AFTER?

Each student group worked on a 200–250-word composition, imagining what happened after Alice became the head penguin. These compositions were exchanged among the students, who left comments for the writers to think about. Students were quite creative with this task—the compositions featured a wide range of plots, such as Alice making a powerful speech at the United Nations in favor of carbon tax and penguin scouts struggling to find new icebergs as global warming worsens.

As can be seen from above, multimodal resources were applied when designing the course around *Our Iceberg Is Melting*. Students' outputs were not confined to one single mode or answers on paper tests. Their outputs included (1) oral readings of parts of the book; (2) letter writing; (3) poster making, sharing, and commenting; and (4) possible plots for the sequel. The course is definitely *custom-made* (Richards, 2013) to appeal to students' needs and interests, although innovative and student-centered methods were adopted to sustain their motivation (Schoff, 2016). It is worth reemphasizing the importance of incorporating multimodal resources into language courses to help



FIGURE 1 A poster made by students



FIGURE 2 Students displayed their posters on the blackboard

develop students' abilities to think creatively and to enhance their language skills across language domains. Such incorporation requires teachers to constantly pay attention to newly available multi-modal resources as well as devise creative ways of integrating them into their daily teaching. It is hoped that more language teachers will embark on such a journey to transform their teaching and classrooms. Language teachers should also consider teaching beyond language forms and rules and incorporate important social issues into their teaching (Chaves-Carballo & Villalobos-Ulate, 2015) to cultivate global citizens who are creative and dedicated to making a difference.

6 | THE AUTHOR

Cheryl Wei-yu Chen has taught English in Taiwan for over a decade. She enjoys infusing creativity into her daily teaching. She believes that language teachers should teach beyond the four basic skills and incorporate social issues into their teaching.

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APPENDIX

Group letters written to Leonardo DiCaprio

(1)

Dear Mr. DiCaprio:

We just watched your documentary *Before the Flood* in our English class. We really appreciate your efforts. Our favorite part was when you visiting the Indonesian jungles and feeding the rescued animals. We know there are some indeed changes that we must do it rapidly to reach a safer future. Such as eating wisely, buying organic food, planting more trees, and taking the general transportations as possible as we can. By doing so, we can protect our Earth from climate changing.

Sincerely,

Your fans from Taiwan,

Max, Serena, Gordon, Gina, Tim

(2)

Dear Mr. Leonardo DiCaprio:

We watched *Before the Flood* in class. Some of us also watched your recent film *The Revenant*. We always love your acting, and it is great to see you in documentary. Our favorite part of the film was when you talked to the astronaut Dr. Sellers. It's very touching.

Through the information that you gave, we realized the seriousness of global warming. Now, we have some ideas about helping changing this threatening situation. First, we can eat chicken instead of eating beef and take public transportation. Second, using the eco-friendly tableware. Third, doing recycling well and reusing some resources that we can utilize again. Everyone has the responsibility to help change the global warming. It's everyone's duty and no one can escape from it.

Yours Truly,

Louis, Toby, William, Mike