

Members' Voices | メンバーの声

Creative Collaboration - Kickstarting the 21st Century Classroom

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Intro

Hello everyone, I'm Tim. My journey to Japan started off in the UK, when I met and married a lovely Japanese lady in 2000. I came to Japan the following year to learn more about her life and culture. We'd only planned to stay for a few years. But when the little ones came along, time just seemed to fly by. I started off as an ALT. Since then, I have worked in universities for 16 years teaching English and cultural courses. Even after all this time, I still feel like I am just starting to gain the cultural competency to do my job properly! I take that as a positive because it means there is still so much to explore and keep me engaged. I am fascinated by creativity and collaboration, and explore them in my teaching and with informal networks online. I think creativity is a humanizing force that gives a sense of place and purpose in life. I am a photographer <https://chapinthehat.com>. I work with volunteer groups in Okayama and Fukushima. I like to run up hills. I like to run far.

Research Interest: Creativity and the EFL Classroom

I guess Ken Robinson is one of my educational heroes. I fell for Ken when I watched his hilarious takedown of conventional education, 'Do schools kill creativity?' (Robinson, 2007). His deep belief in the creative potential of others hit a chord with me, as did his observation that education often lionized test success in highbrow subjects and stigmatized nonacademic forms of creativity. At present, my eldest daughter is battling through university entrance exams. For her, English has become a purely academic exercise of grammar-translation; a matter of ticking the right box. This notion of English having a right answer can reduce student autonomy and spontaneity. I believe that creative collaboration is a great way to help students

escape the 2D maze of grammar-translation and switch on their communicative potential.

Creativity has been identified as the cornerstone of approaches to 21st Century Skill development (Scott, 2015). People often conflate creativity with being artistic; thinking 'I'm not artistic, so creativity's not for me.' However, creativity is a new, surprising and valuable contribution in *any* field of human endeavour (Boden, 2004). It's just as 'at home' in the dark matter of astrophysics as the Titanium white of Picasso's *Guernica*. We can think of it in terms of creative *contributions* (new products, painting, and ways of thinking); or as a set of creative *behaviours* (divergent, convergent, imaginative thinking) that lead to those contributions. How these contributions are valued is culturally dependent with some cultures prioritizing conceptual novelty, whilst others prioritize appropriateness (Niu & Sternberg, 2006). So, how does creativity relate to language learning?

Imagination and creativity can aid learning and communication skills. Empathy and social-emotional imagination allow us to visualize different times, peoples and perspectives (Gottlieb et al., 2017) and gain a deeper understanding of the human condition (Chappell et al., 2012). This understanding helps us interpret others in everyday conversation and communicate appropriately (Jones, 2016). In addition, language-play results in memorable phrases that aid understanding and information retention (Tagg, 2013). So, creative thinking skills are a fundamental part of communication—creating a mindset that is open to new possibilities and able to make and retain connections.

In my own practice, I have long focused on collaborative group work and physical building tasks like the egg-drop challenge. My university classrooms are often strewn with newspaper, straws, spaghetti, tape, hastily hashed-out plans, a fair sprinkling of wonky towers, and broken eggs—all joyful accidents as teams try to outsmart and entertain each other. These activities are all about creating spaces for creative play. Creative play embodies an open mindset and spirit of engagement. Creative play is an intrinsically motivated, autonomous and interactive process (Cleminson et al., 2019) that facilitates

1. Democratic participation and collaboration
2. Improvisation, risk-taking and emergence
3. Plurality of identity and possibility thinking. (Craft, 2012)

A sense of autonomy, a willingness to improvise and adapt to the situation are essential components of real-world communication. This requires both cognitive flexibility and psychological resilience. Creative play enables students to use English whilst collaborating, encountering problems, building solutions, and experiencing failure and success. These experiences can help practice problem solving in English and build resilience. The question for me then became: How can I do this in a more structured and meaningful way in the EFL classroom?

Design Thinking: Communicative and Collaborative EFL Model

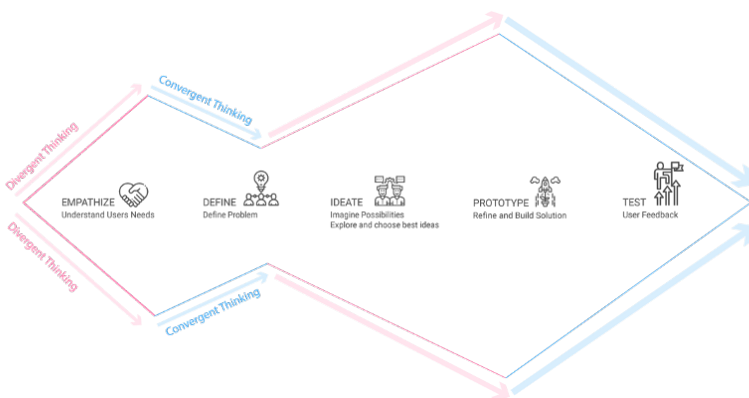


Figure 1. Design Thinking Model

Over the last few years, I have explored the suitability of Design Thinking (DT) as a communicative and collaborative model for EFL. Design thinking aims to create solutions that users value (IDEO U, 2020; Stanford d.School, 2010). DT starts with empathetic interviews to understand problems from the users' perspectives. Design teams then ideate possible solutions in a free-thinking and iterative process. Through discussion, the best possible solution is chosen and a prototype is developed and tested. Based on feedback, the solution is redesigned and made fit for purpose. So, the DT process requires collaborative risk taking and divergent thinking to generate possible solutions and critical and convergent thinking to make the solution fit for purpose.

When I have implemented courses based on DT, I have found students to be highly engaged and animated in their discussions (Cleminson & Cowie, 2019). They have also come up with some incredibly imaginative solutions. Empathetic interviews help to develop deep-listening skills and social-emotional imagination. Iterative design tasks help to develop divergent and convergent thinking. Collaborative problem solving promotes communication as students present, discuss,

and refine their ideas. Increased student control of learning promotes inter-learner engagement (Skehan, 2003), scaffolded learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and positive affective states (Sawyer, 2007). In these ways, collaborative and creative project work provides a method to practice improvisation and develop communicative resilience and autonomy. Hence, DT, can create dynamic classroom environments that help students learn language competencies for the globally connected and uncertain futures they face.

If any other people are interested in learning more, or share similar research interests, I'd love to chat. Thanks for reading.

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Writing classes and the next generation of translational software

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During a final interview for a tenured associate professor position I was met with a question that caught me by surprise. The university is best known for its strength in science and technology, and this background gives faculty members an interesting perspective toward the humanities. While I don't recall the precise and more polite wording of the question, the gist of it was: "Given the great advances in translation software in recent years, it will soon be possible to automatically translate text and even speech with great accuracy. If this is the case, why should we give you a permanent position as an English teacher?"

I apparently managed an answer that impressed the interviewers sufficiently enough to continue with the hiring process, but the question has haunted me ever since, and even more so since I discovered DeepL

Translate ([deepl.com](https://www.deepl.com)), the AI software that translates text with considerably more accuracy than Google Translate. While DeepL isn't perfect, it handles many of the issues that you thought translational software would never be able to handle—politeness register, pronouns, context—with surprisingly intuitive ease. Soon, I found myself using it to translate many of my work emails and replies to said emails. Writing and reading such messages has been a key way I learn Japanese, but it is hard to keep the habit up when I know I can finish the task at hand at the click of an icon. The writing appears to be on the wall.

I wondered more about what effect DeepL would have on language classes through 2020, when my classes went online and became more dependent on students' written work. I teach two Listening and Speaking classes, one with an average TOEIC score of about 500 and the other with an average score of about 650. I have them do debates in teams while the rest of the class watches and votes on what team was more persuasive, but find this assignment works better if students have ample time to prepare opinions that will be of interest to the class and are sufficiently controversial and arguable, and then to articulate their thinking on these topics and formulate defensible arguments to support their beliefs in advance.

First, I ask them to "tell me something you believe that many people your age do not believe", and screen the responses for answers that are either not controversial enough among their peers (e.g., "Japan's rapidly aging population poses challenges") or are too subjective or trivial to argue about in detail (e.g., "I don't think chocolate tastes good"). The students then complete a survey of their peers' opinions, and indicate which they agree or disagree with and how strongly. I use this information to determine what topics each student will argue for or against, and assign an argumentative essay for preparation following a basic five-paragraph format: Introductory paragraph (introducing the opinion), three body paragraphs, each listing a different and distinct reason for the belief in each paragraph's topic sentence ("The first/second/third reason is because..."), explanation of the reason and a citation of facts or statistics that support each reason, and finally a closing paragraph to summarize the position. To prepare them for this, I introduced them to Toulmin's argumentation model, which breaks arguments into individual components such as claims and warrants.

I asked students to write their answers in their own words and not to rely on translational software, even if it meant fumbling English grammar sometimes. But clearly, not all of them were following those instructions. Some transgressions were easy to catch; paragraphs would begin in the prescribed format, but in the next sentence the narrative would veer off onto strange, logically mangled tangents that perfectly matched the text of the essay's sources after passing those links through Google Translate. As usual, that software's flaws made it easy to spot. And even when there were few mistakes, it was easy to see that the essays were a patchwork of original sentences and autotranslated direct copying due to the sudden shifts in style and tone.

More worrying were the essays where the English was grammatically perfect through and through. The students in these classes were good, but not that good. I don't know for a fact that any of my students used DeepL to translate their essays to English straight from all-Japanese drafts. But they *could* have, considering the quality of its translations. And even if they haven't yet, they likely will one day soon. Recently I got a letter in the mail regarding some administrative issues from Waseda University, where I teach a few part-time classes. The reverse of the letter was a near-perfect English translation. At the bottom was a note it had been automatically translated using Deepl. If universities and businesses here are already using it, It won't stay secret from students for very long.

Where does that leave us as language teachers? I have had this debate with my colleagues over Slack for a few months now. We have agreed that it would be hypocritical for us to entirely condemn using the new software when we find ourselves using it so often in our own administrative work. But even if such software is permitted in student work, there are still other considerations students must make in order to write English at an academic level. To write something one must know what one needs to write, not just have the language proficiency to write it. For this reason the software doesn't negate the value of genre analysis, for example. And students still need to learn how to make and support a logical argument if they need to write an argumentative essay. Essays written for this purpose in Japanese follow a markedly different and less culturally appropriate structure that sticks out like a sore thumb no matter how good the literal translation is.

In the case of my own classes, I found that since the essays had so few grammatical errors that I wasn't

getting lost in the weeds of endless minor corrections, and could instead focus on the strengths and weaknesses of students' individual arguments. My comments were more often aimed toward things like inconsistencies between arguments and the facts used to support them, weaknesses in the quality of sources and suggestions on how arguments could be improved. Second drafts of essays were much better, and to my surprise student evaluations showed that the essay-writing and the feedback they received were popular aspects of the course, second only to the debates themselves. Grading students' writing is often an unpopular task for teachers due to its time and labor-intensive aspects. But once students' written prose was good enough I could understand what they were trying to say the first time I read it and was able to get past endless corrections of the uses of "a" and "the", I found the process quite smooth and enjoyable. I was able to engage with their ideas much more freely and directly than I was able to in the past. In the year before the pandemic, teaching students how to analyze and poke holes in arguments using the Toulmin model was an uphill battle. This year, a greater proportion of students' cognitive load could be dedicated toward these key conceptual aspects of formulating arguments and rebutting those of opponents.

Given this experience, I find myself more optimistic about the effect of translation software on language classes. Perhaps this software will become to foreign language classes what calculators have been to math classes: a way to handle the more tedious aspects of the subject quickly in order to devote more time to more conceptual aspects of practice. While the shift will be controversial and will likely inspire much debate in the years to come, I suspect that in the future, EFL writing classes will become more and more similar to non-EFL English classes at the high school and college levels, with greater emphasis on developing the higher-order skills that separate good writers in a given language from poor ones, regardless of how much vocabulary and how many grammatical rules they have memorized prior to the start of the class.

For more on the Toulmin model, see:
<https://courses.lumenlearning.com/englishcomp2kscep/master/chapter/toulmins-argument-model/>

Experiencing Presence in English

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It is natural and common that language educators reflect on how they acquire a new language and apply the strategies and experiences in their teaching. Ever since I started teaching, I always recall my own experiences in learning languages, whether or not they were successful. When I plan my lessons, I very likely design activities that I wish I could have done when I was a student.

Born and raised in Taiwan, I then migrated to the States in my early 20s, and now I currently teach in Japan. I originally came to Japan as an ALT working with the JET Program in 2013, teaching at kindergartens, elementary schools and junior high schools for five years. Before I started working at the university level, I taught English part-time at a private high school for about six months. As a non-native speaker in English, it was a long journey (and still is) for me to empower myself by repositioning from solely oppressed, minor, nonnative or silenced to a position in which I can experience my presence in English communities.

In Taiwan, even though my parents spoke Taiwanese to each other, my mother would speak Mandarin to my sisters and me to make sure we could understand instructions when we first started kindergarten. It was common in Taiwan that parents use their respective languages at home but speak Mandarin to their children because Mandarin was considered more important many years ago. Therefore, I grew up understanding Taiwanese but regret not being able to speak Taiwanese even now. I started studying English in junior high school. I enjoyed it and would spend my spare time reading English learning magazines. Majoring in English in college in Taiwan, I felt in some way satisfied that I was studying English. I did not picture how I would use it in the future and what it meant to “use” English. I was “studying” English, and that was good enough. However, when I was in college, my parents suddenly announced that our family “finally” had received Green Cards (permanent residency) -- apparently, they had applied long ago without informing their young children and had been waiting for the result for more than 10 years. When I was told that we had received Green Cards, it was quite a shock for me. I had never imagined living overseas and speaking another language in daily life. I

was angry, anxious, and grievous. I did not want to move at all.

When my sisters and I emigrated to the States, I was initially quite confused. I could speak English well enough, but I did not feel my presence there. I was intelligent and had already got my BA in Taiwan, but in the States, I found myself thinking that I could only do grocery shopping, write emails, and have small talk. I thought I was still an English learner there, a newcomer and a foreigner to the country. Who am I standing there speaking English when people did not want to listen to me? Can I expect anyone to pay attention to me when I speak? I felt I lost my power as a person in California, as Zou would describe (1998). She explains that no matter how intelligent, experienced, powerful, and competent immigrants have been in their home country, without language proficiency they lose their power in a new country. Even in graduate school, to get my MS in TESOL, I could not actively join class discussions (my classmates could read one line and say ten lines, yet I could understand an article without knowing what to say in class). Outside of my studies, in my daily life in California, I also experienced powerlessness when I could not fight for myself in English. I remembered when Bank of America charged me an extra transaction fee, I couldn't argue to get my money back. In other cases, sometimes people would not listen to me because of my accent and poor vocabulary. I felt I was dumb and powerless.

After living in California for about two years, I finally noticed that I needed to identify myself with something else. I couldn't just be an English learner. I needed something powerful inside of me to cause people to become interested in me and listen to me when I talked. I worked on my accent; I watched the news; I became curious and critical about everything around me and reasoned more carefully. After a few years, I finally developed my new identity as Taiwanese American; for me this identity explained why I was in America. I came to realize that I am not solely Taiwanese; I did not think the way Taiwanese people thought nor did things the Taiwanese way. I was not entirely American (of course I was not); I didn't even know the cartoons that children watch. It was not an easy process, and it took many years of constant reflection, evaluation, self-talk, arguing, fighting, negotiation, and frustration to come to this transformation.

It was ironic enough that when I moved to Japan, my identities were questioned again. Japanese people around me did not think I was American even though I came as a US citizen to teach at public schools in Japan. Some of my American ALT colleagues did not consider me as American either. I felt I needed to put in more of

the American social side of me to be more American. It took me a few more years to struggle, to reflect, to argue, and to negotiate. All this helped me develop into the person I am today. Because of these struggles, I became more confident even when I speak the new language, Japanese. I am convinced that my journey would be more challenging, and I would be intimidated if I did not have the skills to think critically, process, analyze, and evaluate. All those skills helped me negotiate my identity in English, Japanese, Mandarin, and Taiwanese. Over the years, I have become able to position myself where I am in any language community. I am not who people think I am, but rather who I think I am, with my multicultural and multilingual backgrounds.

Drawing insights from my own story, when I am teaching, even with different age groups, I always wonder: will the lessons be relevant to the students? Will they feel empowered when they communicate? Is this activity going to help them connect with the language? Will they develop a different identity as a community member when they contribute ideas in English? What will help my students to be successful in this new language?

Because of my experiences, when I teach, I decided that I do not want to claim my expertise. I am not an expert on any languages or cultures, but I can talk about all of them. I hope to demonstrate to my students that they don't have to sound or perform native-like to feel confident when they speak. That expectation is too unrealistic. My role in the classroom is more of a life coach guiding students to contribute and think as a community member, and hopefully, through that, the students can feel their own presence when they contribute in English.

I am currently teaching English-integrated skills courses to freshman, sophomore, and junior students learning a different foreign language rather than English. We discuss health, judicial systems, fashion, environment, technology, economics, social issues, and more. Through the discussions, I found some students can be disconnected when they use the L2 even if they are motivated. When they use the English language inside or outside of class, they do not consider it as practical or real, or even further, they lack emotions when using the L2. I also observed that even if they can process information in their main language and form their opinions, students rarely have the opportunity to obtain information in English, process it in English, evaluate in English, and develop their opinions in English. In my classes, students need to ask questions and research respectively, and from what I have found, most students use Japanese sources and use Google Translate. Some of them also share that they would

translate their ideas from Japanese into English, even in conversations. With all observations above, even if students are fluent English speakers, they sometimes can lose their agency in English. Do they feel "a sense of [themselves]" (Davies, 2000, as cited in Vitanova, 2005, p. 152) or "feel [their] own presence" (Morita, 2004, p. 592) in the L2 world?

My teaching philosophy, then, is to provide ways for learners to develop skills to process information in English, analyze it in English, reflect on it in English, and apply it to their lives in English. I hope that the skills can help them develop their new identity in the new L2 community. Of course, providing a safe environment for students to exercise and practice the skills in is, therefore, teachers' responsibility. In terms of class activities, I have been developing different activities to cultivate students' critical thinking skills to analyze and process the class materials and reflect and connect the information to their own life stories. They are required to continually ask questions when they read and listen to presentations, research on their inquiries, role play, and reflect on their own life. English is then moving from the linguistic level to the practical level, giving them the power to speak. Encouraging student choice where students choose activities to participate in and designing student-centered activities is also a strategy to develop learners' responsibility in learning.

According to the survey I did last summer, many of my students expressed the view that after learning how to think critically in English, they felt more mature, proud, motivated, educated, and confident. When language educators recognize students as English users, as members of the English-speaking community, rather than English learners, their students will be empowered and more responsible for their learning. They will experience presence in English.

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