

# An Imaginative Approach to Teaching Writing

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Mindful of the fact that one of the most important ingredients in learning to write in a foreign language is *motivation*, we have experimented in our classes with a wide range of exercises from a very useful source: Gianni Rodari's *Grammatico della Fantasia: Introduzione all'arte di inventare storie* (Torino: Piccola Biblioteca Einandi, 1973). Rodari provides a list of recipes and concoctions for developing writing practice. Some of his ideas have already been tested (see Rinvolucru's *Once upon a Time*, pp. 93–96), but we have tried to test all of his ideas, and can say that these experiments with intermediate students have been successful. We believe the reasons for their success are these:

The exercises have been devised to motivate the students to use and improve their writing skills.

Most of them are done as pair work or group work, which facilitates communication between the students.

The exercises usually consist of two or three parts, so that they are not too long and boring. The students must do the first part well in order to accomplish the second.

Most important of all, they require the students to exercise imagination.

The exercises require the students to establish relationships between concepts, ideas, and words outside of normal use, which forces them to review their primary use. This is a further semantic step.

All these reasons can be summed up in one: the exercises are an *imaginative approach* to teaching varieties of writing.

## A sampling of exercises

To show what these exercises are like, we will describe some of them, adding illustrative examples where necessary.

### 1. WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF ... ?

**Preparation:** None

**Organization:** Individual/pair work

**Procedure:** Tell the students to write a composition using one of the following ideas:

1. ... if a crocodile came into the class to study English?
2. ... if one day we found the streets in our city covered with grass and flowers?
3. ... if I invited an Extraterrestrial to have lunch at home?

Tell the students to invent new ideas if they don't like the ones you have given them.

**Grammar:** Conditional sentences (second type)

### 2. COMPLETE THE POEM

**Preparation:** Give the students several first lines of poems

**Organization:** Pair work

**Procedure:**

*Step 1.* The students must choose one of the first lines and, using it, write a complete poem of whatever length they wish.

*Step 2.* The students read the poems aloud to the class, and then choose the best ones. You can display these on the wall.

### 3. RIDDLES

**Preparation:** None

**Organization:** Group work

**Procedure:**

*Step 1.* Tell the students to write a riddle according to the following instructions:

*1st line:* Define an object as if you were seeing it for the first time.

*2nd line:* Describe the object by comparing it with something you know.

*Step 2.* When the students have written their riddles, they ask the rest of the class to guess what it is.

*Example:*

It has two circles with two eyes on them.  
It looks like a bike. (Answer: a pair of glasses)

#### 4. CHAINED NONSENSICAL STORIES

**Preparation:** Prepare a list of questions with the verb tense that you want to practice. For example:

Who was she/he/it?  
Where was she/he/it?  
What was she/he/it doing?  
What did she/he/it say?  
What did she/he/it say to the people?  
How did the story finish?

**Organization:** Group work

**Procedure:**

*Step 1.* Have each student take a sheet of paper. Ask the questions listed above one at a time. After the students have answered the first question, they should fold up their sheets so that the answer is hidden, and then pass their paper along to another student. Then have them write an answer to the second question, fold the paper to hide the answer, and pass it along as before. Continue in this way until all the questions have been answered. Each student should answer the questions according to the original idea s/he had when answering the first question.

*Step 2.* Have each student unfold the sheet that s/he has at the end, and write a short story by joining the sentences into a paragraph (even though it apparently makes no sense) on a new sheet of paper.

*Step 3.* Have the students read the “stories” aloud and choose the funniest or most nonsensical one.

*Example:*



A rich man was in the garden brushing his teeth. He said: “What a lovely day!” And then he said to the other people: “I’ll do the cooking myself,” and he went in when it began to rain.

#### 5. WELL-KNOWN STORIES TOLD THE OTHER WAY AROUND

**Preparation:** None

**Organization:** Individual/pair work

**Procedure:** Tell the students to think of a well-known traditional story (e.g., Cinderella), and have them write a composition, giving the characters values exactly opposite to those they have in the real story: the wicked characters become the good ones, and vice versa.

#### 6. AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?

**Preparation:** None

**Organization:** Individual/pair work

**Procedure:** Tell the students to think of a well-known traditional story (e.g., Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Bluebeard, Little Red Riding Hood, etc.), and have them write a composition starting where the traditional story ended.

#### 7. THE BEGINNING OF A STORY

**Preparation:** None

**Organization:** Individual work

**Procedure:** Give the students the beginning of a story (e.g., “Last week I went to visit Frankenstein ...”) and tell them to complete the story.

#### 8. PICTURE COMPOSITION

**Preparation:** None

**Organization:** Pair work

**Procedure:**

*Step 1.* Tell the students to draw a picture. Two students must draw on the same sheet, and neither of them has to take into account what the other has drawn.

*Step 2.* Each one must write a composition describing the final picture.

*Step 3.* They must discuss which composition better reflects their picture, and explain why.

#### 9. CREATIVE ERRORS

**Preparation:** Provide the students with a list of their own errors, if possible.

**Organization:** Pair/group work

**Procedure:**

*Step 1.* The students must give a definition of the new word (error).

*Step 2.* They must write a short story using at least five creative errors.

*Example:*

a three (for *a tree*) = a tree that stands between a second and a fourth tree

a legg (for *a leg*) = a leg with two feet

a buk (for *a book*) = a book in which all the words start with "u"

bluetiful = something beautiful and blue

## 10. CHOOSE THE PREFIX

**Preparation:** Prepare a sheet with different prefixes. Make as many photocopies as there are groups in the class, and cut them out.

**Organization:** Group work

**Procedure:**

*Step 1.* Tell the students to write down simple nouns (e.g., *pen, nose, bed, book, dog, house*, etc.). They must then randomly combine the prefixes with the nouns. They should then write down a list of the new words.

*Step 2.* Have the students give a definition of each new word.

*Step 3.* Have them write a short story containing as many of the new words as possible.

Prefixes that can be used: *super-, mini-, maxi-, micro-, uni-, non-, inter-, poly-, un-, bi-, anti-, tri-, extra-, dis-, pre-, post-*.

*Example:*

unpen = a pen without ink

non-nose = a man who has a big hole in the middle of his face

antifood = hamburgers, hot dogs, junk food in general

bihouse = a house with two roofs

triteacher = a teacher who teaches three subjects

## 11. NEWSPAPER HEADLINES

**Preparation:** Cut out some headlines from a newspaper and photocopy them.

**Organization:** Group work

**Procedure:**

*Step 1.* Hand out a photocopy to each group. The students must mix up the words in the headlines to make funny new headlines. They are acceptable if they are grammatically correct.

*Step 2.* After the students have written the new headlines, they must write a piece of news to go with one of them.

## Conclusion

Our aim in writing this article has been to offer a variety of simple resources to English teachers who consider

their students' creativity extremely important. Nearly all of the exercises we have shown can be applied to all levels, although they will have to be adapted to take into account the grammatical structures, words, and expressions appropriate for the particular students.

We have given no indication as to the length of time for each exercise, because we think that depends on several variables: the number of students, the duration of the lesson, the different levels within the same group, etc.

Since writing has always been the hardest skill for our students to develop, they have found with this new approach a way of enjoying their own compositions while at the same time having fun.