# ”I THINK, THEREFORE I AM DANGEROUS” - DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING AT THE ENGLISH CLASS- FOR ROMANIAN AND HUNGARIAN STUDENTS

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*Abstract: The term ‘creative writing’ often puts people off – both teachers and students alike; it is often regarded as being reserved for gifted writers. This article reports on a collaborative endeavour initiated by a teacher of English in order to nurture, spread and celebrate a spirit of creativity and creative writing among teachers and for young EFL/ESL readers and students in Romania.*

*Keywords: English- Romanian translation, phraseological value, stories, anecdotes, traps, mot-a-mot, mother tongue, culture, local, teacher, student*

## Belief in the value of creative writing

As compared to the other language skills, writing has a more limited role for most people outside an educational setting. It is important to consider writing activities in EFL/ESL classrooms not only from the ‘instrumental’ perspective of what is useful for external purposes, but also in terms of their educational function. Apart from the communicative or social function, writing serves the educational purposes of developing students’ „cognitive and affective abilities” (see Harris, 1993; Campbell, 1998). While the social and the cognitive roles of writing are reflected in many EFL/ESL teaching materials, the affective function of writing is often neglected. It is important to consider the affective role of writing, a neglected area in many EFL/ESL writing materials and programmes in Romania. In this view, writing is a tool for expressing oneself, one’s personal feelings, and is associated with creative writing. Creative writing gives learners a chance to write about things that are important and interesting to them, and a chance to share personal aspects of their lives with other members of the class. It enables learners to ‘become themselves’ in their new language and to take control over their language by governing its product. In creative writing activities, students push past their current language abilities. When feelings are evoked, students write above their language abilities, so that writing becomes an enjoyable and pleasant task for both students and teachers.

Creative writing is often restricted to literature classes and many EFL/ESL teachers, in particular non-native English speaking teachers, often do not feel competent and confident enough to exploit creative writing in their classrooms. The term ‘creative writing’ often appears daunting for EFL/ESL teachers and students alike. In the reported endeavour, the group explore the various features of ‘creativity’ and ‘creative writing’ and share their experiences of promoting creative writing. At any proficiency level, there may be places in an EFL/ESL curriculum where writing creatively can provide breadth and interest to the programme. Creative writing gives learners a chance to write about things that are important and interesting to them, and a chance to share personal aspects of their lives with other members of the class. Creative writing activities can change students’ perceptions not only



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about writing but also about themselves and the world they live in. It can lower their anxiety. It can develop their writing proficiency, cognitive fluency, personalities and abilities of noticing the familiar in an unfamiliar way or vice versa.

**Belief in the learning community**

The importance of creating a learning community in teaching and learning has been noted by many educators (e.g. Lenning and Ebbers 1999). A learning community is an intentionally developed community that promotes, stimulates and maximizes the group's and group members' learning. It is a place where members learn from and with others, incorporate and value diversity, share a culture, encourage participation and sharing of leadership, and engage in product-oriented activities, i.e. activities which are related to their immediate surroundings, real needs and issues (see Lenning and Ebbers 1999).

The reported endeavour encourages the group to become a learning community. They have an opportunity to practise shared leadership and responsibility. They are responsible for participating in multiple tasks – producing creative work, peer editing, presenting ideas, writing for publication, disseminating ideas and networking. The endeavour also enables them to learn from each other, discover and value the expertise of their peers.

**Belief in teacher-made language teaching materials**

In recent years, issues such as localisation, humanisation and appropriateness of language teaching materials and curriculum have received increasing attention as opposed to earlier emphases on globalisation, standardisation, and authenticity. Many scholars have recently begun to highlight the need to bring language teaching materials closer to local cultures and local values. (Day 2003) emphasises the importance of appropriateness rather than authenticity of texts used in language teaching. Day and Bamford (1998) use the term 'language learner literature' to refer to material (both fiction and non-fiction) specifically written for language learners. They claim that 'language learner literature' is a genuine genre like other genres such as science fiction, children's literature, mysteries, etc. It is written for an identifiable audience (language learners) and its primary purpose is to communicate a message and not to teach language.

The objective of the group, which is not sponsored by any single institution but operates on an entirely voluntary basis, is to produce original stories and poems in English which can be used in the teaching of English in Romanian and Hungarian communities in Transylvania. Due to the fact that I am from the region, I strongly believe that we have a better intuitive grasp of what will appeal to young and adult readers in that region.

Apart from the development of different language skills, one major goal of a language programme is to help pupils gain knowledge and respect for other cultures and values, and to provide room for them to develop their creativity. Storytelling is a perfect tool to achieve these goals.

Well-written stories provide significant content and a "what happens next" sequence allows children and beginning readers of any age to attend to the continuous building of meaning in a story. Studies over the years indicate that most children, including those who have difficulties in learning, seem to learn to listen, read, and respond better to exciting narratives.



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There is a bit of magic in every good story. Good stories, no matter how long or short, can enchant listeners/readers and stretch their imaginations. A short story, when used in the classroom, can serve many purposes, e.g. as a discussion starter, rounding off a special unit or topic, as an interesting practice in reading aloud and predicting, or just as pure entertainment. You can use short stories in the classroom as "stepping stones" to help students think critically, to increase their awareness of another culture, to offer opportunities for them to use the language in role plays, and eventually, to encourage them to develop their creativity by writing their own short stories.

***Components of a story***

**Plot**

This is the "skeleton" of the story. It may include a problem to be solved, a roadblock/an obstacle for the central characters, its solution, a conflict, a climax, etc. It has a beginning, a middle and an end which show the sequence of events that occurs to the characters of the story.

**Setting**

This is the "where and when" of the story, or the time and place and situation in which the story occurs. This can be real or imaginary. The setting can be an integral part to the story, or just a backdrop that is relatively unimportant.

**Characters**

Characters are usually people or personified animals/objects. They may take the form of heroes and villains. Main characters are usually "round" characters because they are well-developed and they grow and change during the story. They are usually active participants in the actions of the story. Secondary/supporting characters are rather "flat" since they are not well-developed and readers know and care little about them.

**Theme**

The theme is the "heart" of the story or the "knot" that ties the events together. It can be the underlying meaning of the story or the moral lesson to be taught (if any). Themes can be explicit or implicit, so younger children may not be able to grasp the theme of the story readily.

**Style**

The style is the form an author uses, or "how" things are said. It can involve word choice and language usage that convey the writer's ideas in a particular way: imagery, metaphor, symbol and sound devices such as alliteration, rhyme, rhythm, etc, may be used.

***Choosing a story***

There is one trick to the magic of storytelling: Find the right story for the right students and the right occasions.

**Some considerations for choosing stories:**

1. Age of pupils
2. Interests of pupils
3. Experience of pupils
4. Maturity of pupils
5. Language ability of pupils
6. Length of the story



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7. Degree of difficulty of the story (in ideas and/or in language)

**Things to watch out:**

- Some families or religions disapprove of the use of fairies, witchcraft, ghosts and violence as the themes of stories.
- Beware of copyright issues.
- Stories which are about real life tragedies should be handled with care or simply avoided if a pupil in the class is experiencing a similar emotion or tragedy in his/her life (e.g. divorce of parents, death of a family member, death of pets, loss of property in a fire, personal injury).

***Strategies for reading and responding to short stories***

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| **1.** | **Visualizing** | - help pupils "see" the scenes, characters and actions of the story |
| **2.** | **Predicting** | - help pupils make logical guesses about what will happen next |
| **3.** | **Engaging** | - get pupils involved in the plot, action and characters in the story |
| **4.** | **Empathizing** | - help pupils identify with the feelings of the characters in the story |
| **5.** | **Elaborating** | - enable pupils to enrich the setting, plot, characters as well as the details of the story |
| **6.** | **Relating to real life** | - place the story in the real world so that pupils can relate the storyline to the incidents and people in their everyday lives |

**1. Rewriting the ending of the story**

After pupils finish reading a story (or the teacher finishes reading a story to the class), pupils can be asked to rewrite the ending of the story, i.e. happy to sad, sad to happy, or with a totally different ending. It is unavoidable that some other parts of the story may have to be changed as well. Of course this writing activity has to be preceded by some class discussion first. New vocabulary may have to be introduced to enable pupils to do a satisfactory job..

Critical Thinking and Creativity: Suggest reasons for changing or improving the ending, identify other parts that need to be changed as well after the ending has been rewritten, create a different scenario, explore different solutions for the same problem, etc.

- Cultural Awareness: Understand why the ending can be changed if the ethnic background of the story is changed, what behaviour is unacceptable in the original story but is acceptable if the cultural background is changed, etc.

In the same way, students could write stories independently, in order to develop their critical thinking. This is exactly what I asked my students to do. As one can see further, they came up



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with some brilliant open ended stories. I categorized the stories dependig on students' levels of English:

**Pre-Intermediate**

1. A man is discovered dead sitting at his desk in a locked office. There is an envelope in front of him in which a check is enclosed. How did he die?

Answer: The envelope glue was poisoned and as he wanted to seal it, he licked it. Shortly afterwards he died. (Class VII.C, School Romulus Guga, Târgu Mureş, 2005.)

2. Legend has it that a rich but wicked man once offered a poor beggar an earthenware jug containing a sweet-smelling liquid that the wicked man swore would turn everything it came into contact with into pure gold. Why didn't the poor beggar believe him?

Answer: If the wicked man tells the truth, then the jug must be of gold,too… (Class VIII. A, School Romulus Guga, 2005.)

3. In a balloon, over the sea , I dropped two wine bottles over the sie. If one was full and the other empty, which hit the ground first?

Answer: Neither, as I was over the sea. ( Pre- Intermediate Group, English for Secretaries, Linguaprof Language School, Târgu Mureş, 2007.)

4. A man is awake night after night without getting a wink of sleep, yet he doesn't feel tired. Why?

Answer: He is a nightshift worker, he gets some rest during the day. (Pre-Intermediate Group, Public Health, Sapientia University,Târgu Mureş, 2012.)

5. Two men get lost while walking in the woods. One starts walking north, while the other goes south. They bump into each other a quarter of an hour later. How is that possible?

Answer: The two men initially went for a walk separately, not together. ( IX. B, Liceul Tehnologic "Sfântul Gheorghe", Sângeorgiu de Pădure, 2009.)

6. A farmer places two 25 kg bags of apples over his shoulders and carries them to his truck. The bags of apples are to be taken into town to be sold. The farmhand carries three bags to the trucks. Who is the stronger, the farmer or the farmhand?

Answer: The farmer, as the farmhand carries empty bags. ( X.C, Liceul Tehnologic "Sfântul Gheorghe", Sângeorgiu de Pădure, 2009.)

7. Who played for both Italy and Russia at the Olympic Games in the same year?

Answer: The musicians, playing the national anthems for both countries ( X. B, Liceul Tehnologic "Sfântul Gheorghe", Sângeorgiu de Pădure, 2009.)

8. Two sons and two fathers plan to go and see the new blockbuster film at their local cinema. They all see the same 8pm showing together and each has a seat in the front row, yet they had only reserved three tickets. Explain.

Answer: Only three men went to the cinema : a son, a father and a grandfather. ( IX. C, Liceul Tehnologic "Sfântul Gheorghe", Sângeorgiu de Pădure, 2009.)

9. Why do some people dial 911 or 999 with their index finger and some with their third finger?

Answer: To call the emergency services. ( IX. B, Liceul Tehnologic "Sfântul Gheorghe", Sângeorgiu de Pădure, 2009.)



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10. Hiding under a table at his sister's birthday party, Ben can see eight pairs of legs walking around in the living room. After a while, he watches everybody go into the next room to eat some food. How is it that there are still six legs in the living room?
Answer: there are Ben's two legs and the table's four legs. (Class VIII. A, School Romulus Guga, 2005.)

INTERMEDIATE

1. The west coast of Scotland is renowned for being very rainy. All the locals wear raincoats, but holidaymaker Mick has no coat, hat or umbrella. He sits in a café drinking a steamy mug of hot coffee. He reads a newspaper to pass the time but eventually decides he should be on his way. To get back to his hotel he needs to walk through a treeless park, yet he arrives back at his hotel dry bone. How could he have avoided getting wet?
Answer: It wasn't raining. (Intermediate Group, Public Health, Sapientia University,Târgu Mureş, 2012.)
2. To refresh his senses after a wild party, a man goes out for a walk across a wet and windswept moor. There is a low cloud cover and not a single star can be seen in the sky. The man is new to the area and doesn't know the geography of the moor. He has no torch or compass and there is no moonlight to guide his path. How does he avoid getting lost?
Answer: The man had stayed at the party all night. It was morning when he decided to go home. ( Intermediate Group, Public Health, Sapientia University,Târgu Mureş, 2012.)
3. Mr. and Mrs. Simpson, their two daughters and a niece are waiting outside a photographic studio for another member of their family before having their family portrait taken. A man walks past and both Mrs. Simpson and her niece greet him simultaneeously. "Hello, father!". Explain.
Answer: The man was a priest( XI.C, Liceul Tehnologic "Sfântul Gheorghe", Sângeorgiu de Pădure, 2009.)
4. Mr. Jones plays polo on Good Friday and injures his leg. He is taken directly to hospital from the polo field and spends two nights in hospital, leaving on Monday. Explain.
Answer: Mr.Jones' horse was called Good Friday. He was playing polo on Saturday.
( XI.C, Liceul Tehnologic "Sfântul Gheorghe", Sângeorgiu de Pădure, 2009.)
5. Eddie bets Richard $10 that he can jump from a ten-storey building to the concrete street below and somehow escape injury. How did Eddie manage to be $10 better off?
Answer: He jumped from a ground floor window. ( Intermediate Group, English for Doctors, Linguaprof Language School, Târgu Mureş, 2008.)
6. A boy is captured by a cruel master who tells him he will have to become a servant to one of his two sons: Henry the Horrible or Sam the Scary. The boy is determined to escape the punishment. He gets one chance to utter a statement that will decide his future. If what he says is true he will serve Henry the Horrible, but if what he says is false he will serve Sam the Scary. What does the boy state that can save his life and set him free?
Answer: " I will serve Sam the Scary". If the master were to make the boy serve Sam the Scary, his statement will have been true; in this case though he should have benn made servant to Henry the Horrible, but if he was serving Henry the Horrible, then his statement will have been false. The master cannot win, so he has to set the boy free. ( Pre- Intermediate Group, English for Engineers, Linguaprof Language School, Târgu Mureş, 2008.)



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7. A man walks into a bar and immediately falls unconscious. Why?
Answer: It was an iron bar! ( Pre- Intermediate Group, English for Engineers, Linguaprof Language School, Târgu Mureş, 2007
8. A man took the decision of moving his car from Pall Mall to a hotel on the Strand. He soon realised the move would bankrupt him. How?
Answer: He was playing Monopoly and realised he didn't have enough money to pay the rent. ( XI.C, Liceul Tehnologic "Sfântul Gheorghe", Sângeorgiu de Pădure, 2009.)
9. How does Adam's favourite team always stay at the top when they never score any goals, and lots of people have seen the players touching the ball by hand?
Answer: It was a basketball team. ( XI.C, Liceul Tehnologic "Sfântul Gheorghe", Sângeorgiu de Pădure, 2011.)

**Upper-intermediate/advanced**

1. Amanda was a passionate spinster who was well-known for her conservative views, yet on hearing that O' Reilley had married two women, without divorcing either of them, and with neither woman divorcing him or dying, she was neither shocked nor outraged. How come?
Answer: O'Reilley was the priest who had conducted two marriage ceremonies.
(Upper-Intermediate Group, Public Health, Sapientia University,Târgu Mureş, 2012.)
2. A man wearing a black hat and scarf parked outside an expensive jeweller's shop, held up a dozen people and walked out of the shop a couple of minutes later with $1000 worth of jewellery. Although one or two people were peering through the windows of the jeweler's shop at the time, none of them batted en eyelid, and a nearby driver merely gave a honk of his horn. How could this have happened?
Answer: the man had gone to the jeweller's shop to collect an engagement ring for his fiancee and had parked his car in a such a way that it blocked the road, thus holding up the traffic.
(Upper-Intermediate Group, Public Health, Sapientia University,Târgu Mureş, 2012.)
3. A tourist, thinking he was late, rushes from his hotel, and runs to the quayside where he sees his ferry at some distance from the docks. He pushes his way through the crowds, and precariously leaps onto the ferry with his suitcase. Miraculously, he is unharmed; he sighs with relief and begins to make himself comfortable on the ferry. A moment later he glances back at the quayside and his heart sinks. Why?
Answer: He realises that the ferry is about to dock. It hadn't just left port as he had surmised.
(Upper-Intermediate Group, Public Health, Sapientia University,Târgu Mureş, 2012.)
4. A man gets into a taxi and names his destination, with the whole address. No more is said between them. The driver takes the man,whom he has never met before, to secluded spot, lures him out of the taxi and brutally kills him. This behaviour is completely uncharacteristic of the usually placid taxi driver. What was his motive?
Answer: The taxi driver had found out that his wife was having an affair, so when the man got into his taxi and said the driver's home address, he assumed he had to be the guilty party.
(Intermediate Group, Public Health, Sapientia University,Târgu Mureş, 2012.)



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