**Forum: Social Justice, Creativity, and Adult Literacy**

*(Part 4 of 4)*

# Unlocking Creativity for Adult Language Learning

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The use of creative tasks—such as storytelling, drama, and art projects—in the language learning classroom can have numerous benefits. While creative activities are widely used in working with younger learners, playful and creative language learning is not as common in adult learning contexts, which are more often framed within a pragmatic approach to language use. However, learning through creativity does not have to end in adulthood. Creativity is a human impulse that just won't quit (Kastenbaum, 1991), a desire that ebbs and flows throughout the life course. Being creative opens up spaces for self-expression (Zeilig & Almila, 2018), political activism (Sawchuk, 2009), and construction of new powerful identities (Balyasnikova & Gillard, 2021). Being creative in the language use is natural and adult language learners are often able to express themselves more creatively drawing on their plurilingual and pluricultural repertoires (Bernaus & European Centre for Modern Languages, 2007).

In this paper, I suggest that use of creative and playful tasks in the English as an Additional Language (EAL)[1] classroom is an effective way to support adult language learning and promote learner engagement. I use the term plurilingualism to refer to the learners' ability to use multiple languages in context, often mixing and blending different languages. I pose that in such contexts, creating conditions for the playful use of non-standard language or many languages should be an intentional pedagogical practice that affirms one's plurilingual repertoire and their plurilingual and cultural identities (Galante, 2019; Piccardo, 2013; Piccardo & Ortega, 2018).

I came to appreciate the potency of integrating creativity in language learning as a practitioner-researcher within an interdisciplinary program in Vancouver, Canada, called Seniors Thrive. This arts-based EAL program helped immigrant seniors learn English, build social connections, and strengthen their leadership beyond the classroom. Most of the programming in Seniors Thrive merged arts-based learning, leadership opportunities, and targeted language learning (see more about the program: Balyasnikova et al., 2018; Balyasnikova & Gillard, 2018, 2021), thus providing a comprehensive and holistic approach to foster active language use by senior learners.

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[1] I will be using the term EAL (English as an additional language) instead of ESL (English as a second language) because it is a more inclusive term that recognizes the diverse linguistic backgrounds of language learners. Some students may already speak multiple languages and are adding English as another language to their repertoire. Using EAL acknowledges and respects the plurilingual contexts of language learning and emphasizes the importance of recognizing the multitude of linguistic resources that learners bring to the classroom (see García & Otheguy (2020) for further elaboration and Flores (2013) for pointed critique).

# Creativity in Language Learning and Use

My experience as a language instructor prompted deep reflection on how to approach the task of encouraging creativity in language learning classroom. This endeavor proved to be challenging, as the concept of creativity is simultaneously ever-present and elusive. Many language scholars differentiate between the Big C and the little c creativity (Jones, 2016). Big C creativity is easily recognized in language use because it refers to highly original language products of famous writers, poets, and playwrights who create monumental works of art such as poetry and prose. Little c creativity refers to everyday language use, being playful with language through creating puns, metaphors, and other forms of wordplay. Regardless of the discussions around definitions, there is a growing consensus that creativity is "innate to all human beings, which can be manifested in all types of discourse" (Hidalgo-Downing, 2016, p. 108). Keeping this understanding at the forefront, I will approach the rest of the paper with the intention of exploring how classroom practices can work towards unlocking learners' creativity(ies) in EAL classes.

Similar to other colleagues, I found that in additional language classrooms playful engagement with the target language "is vital to target language development and growth, mainly because of its inherent potential for 'failing forward'" (Kurtz, 2015, p.73), or learning from failures, seeing them as opportunities for growth. Such growth mindset can be encouraged in different contexts; however, I would pose that it will flourish in classrooms that are playful by design. Playful classrooms encourage learners to draw on diverse modes of expression (multilingual, multimodal) without strict rules of correctness or expectations of excellence.

Playfulness is intellectually stimulating and can act as a catalyst for further creative expression (Luria et al., 2019). Some psychological studies have identified a correlation between playful teaching and students' linguistic creativity (Chang, Hsu & Chen, 2013) as well as higher creativity in how learners themselves co-construct the process of learning the target language (Barabadi et al., 2022). In a way, by fostering an environment of not taking things 'too seriously' and taking risks, playfulness in the classroom might serve as a fertile context for a more creative and experimental engagement with language in the classroom and beyond.

## Seniors Storytelling Club

As part of my doctoral research, I developed a project called the Seniors Storytelling Club within the broader framework of Seniors Thrive. Through 10 weekly gatherings, I guided storytelling sessions where older immigrants shared their experiences related to language learning upon immigration, and actively practiced language skills in a supportive and engaging environment.

The Seniors Storytelling Club was intentionally designed prioritizing creativity in all modes of expression, including creative use of multiple languages. Creating a playful context was of utmost importance, ensuring that participants felt comfortable in their language use and empowered to take creative risks throughout the time we spent together. For example, they were encouraged to experiment with different words (both in English and their primary language), create new sentence structures, and use different modes, thus celebrating the vibrancy of their self-expression. By affirming and accepting learners' use of multiple modes of expression (both verbal and not), the Seniors Storytelling Club aimed to create an environment where participants could

confidently express themselves leveraging their creative abilities.

Seniors Storytelling Club also fostered an atmosphere of respect and understanding by encouraging learners to engage in storytelling on their own terms and according to their unique linguistic backgrounds. It was emphasized to the learners that their stories could be as concise or extensive as desired. It was also explicitly communicated that there was no obligation to write or share a story if they did not feel connection to any particular prompt, granting them the freedom to explore topics of personal interest.

Inspired by the success of Seniors Storytelling Club project, but restricted by COVID-19 closures, I conducted an online study in another literacy program for older adults this time in Toronto, Canada. In this study, I employed digital storytelling as an informal language practice, leveraging the participants' creative impulse to foster meaningful language learning experiences in a virtual space. The success of this project further reinforced my belief in the effectiveness of incorporating storytelling as a creative practice in EAL programming regardless of the mode of delivery. Further in the paper, drawing on my teaching experience and research, I discuss the benefits unlocking learners' creativity for EAL learning by sharing my experience facilitating the two Storytelling Clubs.

## Unlocking Creativity for Language Learning

Integration of creative elements into the classroom practice can transform the learning experience into a more dynamic and engaging process. In today's adult EAL classrooms, the emphasis is often placed on pragmatic competence that leads to certain efficiency of communication. While this approach has its merits, it tends to

prioritize the mechanical aspects of language learning, often neglecting the exploration and utilization of language as a creative medium. Moreover, a prevailing focus on measurable outcomes may inadvertently overshadow the significance of embracing the full potential of learners' creativity, thus denying them this inherent trait. By incorporating creative tasks into language instruction—encouraging learners to come up with multilingual puns, metaphors, and other forms of wordplay—educators might have an opportunity to redirect learners' attention towards a more playful exploration of language and thus affirm their creative impulse. Such an approach not only fosters a more engaging learning environment, but also acts as a catalyst for cultivating a sense of curiosity and appreciation for the rich tapestry of modes of expression available to humans. By encouraging learners to playfully explore the target language and tap into their creative impulse without fear of making mistakes, educators can foster a deeper understanding of language and its creative significance. This brings me to my first insight: **we should move away from focusing on pure efficiency and productivity of language use and towards a more creative language use in the classroom and beyond.**

Seniors Storytelling Club was an EAL class in both its purpose and desire of the participants. This is why, we wanted to make sure that learners engaged in active language production both with the facilitators and each other. We structured our session through a series of storytelling prompts that encouraged learners to create written and multimodal texts.

- Reminiscence prompts: recalling any stories about people, places, or events in their community (e.g., tell me about your community).

- Evaluative prompts: comparing experiences in different contexts (e.g., compare your first day in Canada to today).

- Multimodal prompts: using multiple modes in their writing/speaking (e.g., draw your story and tell about the image).

In response to these prompts, learners often drew on the many languages and modes available to them, creatively adapting and merging them into new linguistic forms. While some might see such texts as ungrammatical, I saw them as artifacts of creative process, representing learners' agency and engagement with multiple modes of expression. In addition, I interpreted reliance on multimodal and plurilingual forms of expression exhibited by several learners as a self-defining act of taking ownership of their own learning. Similar to the findings of the seminal work on identity texts by Cummins and Early (2011), I found that many learners not only actively engaged with the prompts, but also transformed their narrations into more familiar, accessible modes. This plurilingual and multimodal approach to storytelling resulted in deeper learning experiences and the emergence of creative language use. The plurilingual context of the classroom, coupled with the intentional use of storytelling prompts, created valuable opportunities for playfulness with the language. Most learners embraced and celebrated the diverse linguistic resources at their disposal, employing multiple codes to participate actively in the language learning process. Such dynamic not only enhanced the learners' communicative abilities but also reshaped the power dynamics within the classroom. The learners became confident, creative communicators, actively co-constructing a productive playful learning environment. This brings me to my second insight: We should not shy away from multiple language use in the classroom, albeit seemingly chaotic and ungrammatical. On

the contrary, **by intentionally incorporating plurilingual creative prompts, we can foster a learning environment where learners act as agentive and confidant communicators.**

Creating a learning environment in which learners see themselves as stakeholders and valuable members of the community was one of the goals of the Seniors Storytelling Club. This is why all stories – short, long, plurilingual, and multimodal – were published in an illustrated book entitled *Exchanging Stories* that was launched at the end of the course. English and Irving (2015) write that the creation of a physical artifact as a product of creative practices has the potential to generate "social transformation and change" (p. 49). Indeed, creating an artifact together was incredibly affirming for language learners. At the book launch party, the participants each received a copy of the book and got an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings about this publication. The book launch was attended not only by the Seniors Storytelling Club members but also by their friends, relatives, and the staff of the learning centre. During the event, some participants expressed their pride and excitement in seeing their stories in print. They shared their plans to show the publication to everyone they know, further emphasizing the sense of accomplishment they felt in having their work recognized and presented in a physical form. In addition, the book launch was a special event that recognized and celebrated participants' creative use of languages/images in storytelling. It also affirmed learners as valuable contributors, talented storytellers in multiple languages, and published authors. This brings me to my final insight: **when learners have the chance to see the tangible artifact of their creative expression, it fosters a profound sense of accomplishment and a desire for learning.**

## Conclusion

Butterwick and Lawrence (2009) write: "the arts are a way to communicate our stories in ways that connect with others" (p. 35). This paper suggests that creative exercises such as storytelling is an effective way to support adult learning. I discussed what constitutes creativity in language learning and use as well as the benefits of unlocking learners' creativity for EAL programing beyond the language classroom.

Humans are inherently creative beings, and it would be an oversight to neglect it in the language learning classroom. By recognizing and encouraging learners' creative potential, we can foster a dynamic learning environment. From enhancing engagement and motivation to affirming emerging identities of the learners as confident, expressive communicators, integration of creative elements into language instruction can lead to transformative language learning experiences. As educators, we need to seize the opportunity to establish creative language classrooms that reignite learners' inherent playfulness in language use. By embracing learners' creativity in all its forms, we can unlock their full potential and nurture a sense of joy and fulfillment on their language learning journeys.

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