

Creative writing and ELT

I set the different steps for homework for the following weeks and remind them again and again, asking whether they have done it (besides their normal homework). When I get their texts, I first comment on the content, then correct the received texts in a way that is appropriate to the students' level. When I get the printed copy and still find errors that I have overlooked after repeated proofreading, I remind myself of Tim Murphey's kind mantra: "I love mistakes. Mistakes show I'm trying."

Sometimes, even ex-students are willing to contribute and earn their copy that way. The latest *Rollercoaster* issues even contain a part in Spanish with contributions from the teacher and my classmates in my Spanish class, who were quite happy to contribute.

What has motivated me to invest effort, time, and money on 19 *Rollercoaster* issues so far is, among other aspects, expressed by one of my students, and by an ETAS friend.

Feedback from one student

"It was very interesting and exciting to read all these many different reports of relationships. But it was quite difficult for me to understand all the statements very well. I spent a lot of time reading the *Rollercoaster* and doing the quiz. It took me many hours, but I learned many new words. And it was good entertainment and a pleasure for me."

Feedback from my ETAS friend Alison Wiebalck (June 2002)

"The *Rollercoasters*, by the way, are brilliant. I sat down and read them in one fell swoop – once I started I just could not stop, so many lovely windows on people's lives. Even the apparently smallest and most humble are just great."

What I wrote in my editorial to the 2009 *Rollercoaster* issue on the topic 'Important' is true for any topic and is something that also makes our ETAS Journal worth reading and contributing to (see also *Readers' Café!*)

"What makes this *Rollercoaster* issue as rich as the ones in the past is, among other things, the simple fact that all our writers have different backgrounds and look at a given topic from their own points of view. By adopting any writer's point of view, the readers of this issue will see their own world in a different way – be it through the lens of a camera or by reflecting our values or dreams or the reasons for learning – by recalling the past or by interpreting every day incidents or experiences with other cultures in meaningful ways."

“One of the problems that many students have is the high standard they set for themselves, a standard that is unfortunately often too high considering their level of English”

English At Home's *Rollercoaster* invites submissions from teachers and students to our anniversary Issue 20. Contribute and earn a printed copy. Please email me at engl.home.gos@bluewin.ch

Reference

Murphey, T. (2006). *Language hungry: An introduction to language learning fun and self-esteem*. London, UK: Helbling Languages.

Appendix 1

Recipe: How to become a diary writer*

By Susanne Baschnagel

Ingredients:

Booklet: Devote enough time to choosing a beautiful little book, even when you have to spend some money on it, because it will accompany you for a long time, keep you busy for hours and hours, and it is cheaper than anything else (cinema, going out, etc.)

Room: Look for a proper place for your booklet somewhere in your flat. You must be able to grab it any moment, for instance, when you hear a quotation on the radio and you want to jot down immediately.

Time: Don't think about it! You are not supposed to sit down and write and write. Your diary is patient. It'll be happy to be opened for some short moments. Don't expect to write every evening! Just write whenever there is something worth remembering.

Focus: Practice! Get a good eye for interesting situations. Your day is full of them. Then note down the most fascinating ones.

Hints: 'Research in the field': When you have time for a cup of coffee or go for a drink, take your diary with you. You might hear some interesting talk at the next table or see a beautiful 'film' outside the window that might prompt you to reflect on something that is worth jotting down.

For my part: I appreciate when Elsbeth (my teacher) has a look at my English attempts and even comments them. So my diary is a correspondence with her, too, which means: I'm highly motivated to write again.

But because I don't want to do without my diary for several days I photocopy some of my diary entries for Elsbeth. And later I complete them and am happy to re-read my own thoughts ...

*Susanne Baschnagel was a student at English At Home when she submitted the piece above to one of our *Rollercoaster* issues. She is a primary school teacher and mother of two. She kept up diary writing in English for several years and gave me most of it for commenting and correcting, a very rewarding task for me as a teacher. When giving her consent to having her texts published here, she stressed the importance of my comments as a source of motivation to continue writing.

Sample diary**

Hands on a window pane. An enormous window pane. Hands with blue arms, all of them. Men in overalls. Eight with their backs to me, two looking at me, behind the huge window pane, in a shop: Copy Quick. Real teamwork. Eight men removing a huge window pane with Copy Quick printed on it. Slowly, carefully. One of them watching, directing. Nine working. Slowly, slowly removing the window pane. Pulling it onto a long, low cart. Nine blue men pushing the long window pane cart loaded with a huge window pane towards a huge car loaded with other huge window panes. One man, the same as before, walking next to them, trying very hard to look busy.

And immediately I realize how badly I need a camera including a photographer's skills. But neither do I have a camera at the moment, nor do I have the skills in general. So I stick to my note book!

**The above is an excerpt from Susanne Baschnagel's diary which appeared in *Rollercoaster* (2009). The style varies and so does the content, depending on mood, experiences, and situations. The excerpt is special because of its chosen style that sounds more like a poem (creative writing in its strictest sense). If I remember correctly, Susanne was sitting in a café when she observed the scene described above. I especially like her conclusion. (Elsbeth Mäder)

Appendix 2: Examples of 'creative writing in its strictest sense' that have been included in some past *Rollercoaster* issues:

Acrostic poems by B2 students:

Winter: I think about diving
Into the warm sea
Never of cold nights and fireplaces
roaring
Tiger beer instead of hot tea
Excellent fish instead of Fondue
Roaring crashing waves instead of
lightly falling snow

Winter
Invents
New
Themes of
Exceptional
Realities

Contributions by A1/A2 students:

My hobby

Knitting, knitting is my great hobby. I knit socks, jumpers, caps and trousers of wool and cotton.
In June I'm going to become a grandmother.
I've just got the wool for baby socks and trousers.
Now, I must knit!

Silence

I need moments of silence every day. Silence is medicine for my soul. Silence gives me energy. Silence makes my body relax. Silence should be a daily exercise for all people.

Talking is silver and silence is gold.

About the Author

Elsbeth Mäder first trained as a Swiss primary school teacher before studying English at Zürich University, where she earned her Lic Phil I + Diplom für Höheres Lehramt (qualification for teaching at Swiss 'grammar schools') in 1978/1979. In 1987 she opened her own language school teaching EFL to adults ages 18-80. An active member of ETAS for many years, Elsbeth is a regular workshop presenter at ETAS PD Days and Annual Conferences and AGMs, where she shares her long teaching experience and love of English.

The greatest creative writing activity ever

ADAM JOHN SIMPSON

Before you start reading, I would like you to consider these questions: *Have you got a favourite lesson plan or class activity that you come back to and use again and again? What does it consist of? What makes it work?*

What follows is my response. This is an activity that I have used probably with every class I have taught in the last 12 years.

First, I will describe the activity, and then I will tell you why it is great.

1. Write the following questions on the board:

- How long have you been on the planet?
- Why did you go there?
- Describe the two people who are with you.
- Why is your spaceship damaged?
- When you decided to leave your ship, how far did you walk?
- What were you looking for?
- When did you realise that someone was following you?
- Describe the creature.
- While you were running away, you tripped and fell. What happened?
- What was the big surprise at the end of your story?

2. Explain what the learners are going to do.

- You are going to write a paragraph that tells a story.
- Your paragraph will be a response to these questions.
- Any sentence you write is OK, but you must follow the sequence of questions.
- You can ask me for help while you are writing.

3. Go through one or two questions with the group. What kind of language might we use to answer the first question?

- We have been on the planet for two weeks/since last month.
- We arrived here yesterday.

How would we describe the people who are with us?

4. Assign a period of time for learners to write. 20 minutes is long enough for most to finish.

5. As learners finish, get them to swap their stories with each other and let them read. This keeps the early finishers busy, while the slower writers are not disturbed and can get on with their writing.

Why does this work so well?

1. You can adapt this to the level of your class.

For instance, you can phrase the questions so that they are all in the **simple past**, if that is what you wish to practice.

*When did you arrive on the planet?
Why did you leave your friends?*

You can equally make it more complex:

Parallel past continuous: *While you were escaping, what was chasing you?*

Passive structures: *Describe the creature that was following you.*

2. It is structured and yet very creative. The format, in which the progression of the paragraph follows the questions, creates a comfortable framework to work in. Nevertheless, there is a huge amount of freedom for each learner to express themselves when answering each individual question. You are guaranteed to be bombarded with questions about the adjectives they want to use for description and verbs they need for specific actions. The questions are designed so that they always lead on from the previous, regardless of how that question has been answered.

3. It is adaptable. I use the above model with my teenage university students. I've changed the setting to a car that's broken down near a scary haunted house for adult learners, and even a car breaking down on the way to a business meeting in a Business English class.

Have fun and let me know if you use this. As I said, this is an old favourite, not just of mine but of every learner I have used it with. I should mention that this is an adaptation of a similar activity in a resource book called *Recipes for tired teachers: Well-seasoned activities for the ESOL classroom* (1984) by Chris Sion.

Editor's note:

This article originally appeared as a post on Adam John Simpson's blog *Teach them English*: <http://www.teachthemenglish.com/2013/01/the-greatest-creative-writing-activity-ever/> Reprinted here with the kind permission of the author.

About the Author

Adam John Simpson has been teaching for more than a decade in the tertiary education sector in universities in Turkey. He currently works at Sabanci University in Istanbul. His professional interests include descriptive curriculum design, developing flexibility in lesson planning, and integration of technology in the language classroom.