

THINKING OUTSIDE (AND INSIDE) THE BOX

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The idea of using a box with my students occurred to me when I was given a small paper box at a professional development event sponsored by Macmillan. The outside of the box was printed with the publisher's promotional materials. I saw that it was a very well-designed box, and I wondered whether there was something I could do with it in my classroom.

Then I realised that creative language learning and teaching does not take much: it can be as simple as the teacher's or students' ownership of a box, which can be in any shape or form. The box could come from anywhere: I use the box that contains my USB-HDMI cable (see Figure 1), but it could just as well be the box in which an online retailer has delivered your shopping. Any box will do!

Here are three ideas for activities that employ three principles of creativity – curiosity, improvisation and randomness – and which can all be used with students of any level or age. They have a dual aim: to help the students practise language creatively, and to teach them about the principles of creativity.



Figure 1

1 A mysterious box

Many people agree on the importance of cultivating curiosity (the ability to question) in learning. As a lead-in or warm-up activity, the teacher first places a secret object inside the box and gives a few hints as to what it might be. The students then take turns to ask questions about the object in the box (between ten and 20 questions in total) before they have to guess what it is. Useful language structures may be written on the board, depending on the students' level (ranging from *I think it's a ...*, for low-level students, to *Well, it has to be ...*, for more advanced ones). The final 'unboxing' of the object can be made more dramatic with some background music, or even delayed until the end of the lesson, as a way to sustain the students' curiosity and interest.

2 A prop box

The aim of this activity is to encourage improvisation. The students are put into pairs or teams and asked to imagine

that the box has been magically transformed – and what they are looking at now isn't a box at all, but some other object. Using the box as a prop, they then have to take turns to act out a short scene to enable the others to guess what the box has become for them, without using the name of the object. The pair or team of students who are the first to guess correctly then take their turn to act out their scene. Some of my students at CEFR B1 level have performed scenes that depict the box as a cushion, cigarettes, a pair of boots or a paddle. Others have chosen very ordinary objects, such as a lunch box, bottle of milk, mobile phone, hat, laptop, book, eraser, purse, pencil case, watch, motorbike, airplane, etc. It is a good idea to encourage divergent thinking and upgrade the students' linguistic competence by creating a list of over-exploited objects and words and challenging the students to avoid them.

Of course, you don't have to use a box for this improvisation activity, any other object would do. I often use a face mask, a popular object with Ho Chi Minh City-dwellers who commute to work by motorbike.

3 A dice box

The random combination principle dictates that meaningful learning can be created out of randomised construction. A dice box can be used to inject the element of randomness into a variety of activities. Basically, a dice box is a box with six faces, all the same size, on which numbers, words or images can be displayed. When the box is rolled (like dice), whatever is on the face on top must be used by the students in an activity.

To create a dice box, you could use a template downloaded from the Tools for Educators website (<https://goo.gl/8pVggF>). Here, you will find a useful collection of dice templates with dots, texts and pictures. It is a good idea to print the templates out on strong paper, so that they last longer, and to dedicate about ten minutes of class time for the students to cut them out and construct them. Once each student owns a dice, they can work in pairs or teams, taking turns or rolling their dice simultaneously to do the following activities:

- Combine a pair/group of word or picture prompts to produce a creative sentence. For example, *Mum is ironing clothes for our new baby snake* (see Figure 2).
- Combine a pair/group of prompts to create a story.
- Review speaking topics before an exam. ■



Figure 2