

## **Instructional Activities for Critical Thinking and Writing**

**Ching-huang Wang Yi-tzu Wu Yueh-chiu Fang Jenny Wang**

Department of Applied Foreign Languages

National Formosa University, Taiwan

### **Abstract**

A demonstrator at a workshop in Taiwan in the summer of 2004 carried out four teaching activities for teacher participants (mixed gender), most of whom were junior high school English teachers, to think and write critically. The writing workshop lasted three and a half hours. Based on the theories of critical thinking and writing, these activities included: Completing Incomplete Jokes, Completing An Incomplete Passage, "Recycling" Writing, and Printed-characters-based Writing. This paper particularly displays for evidence and sharing several creative works produced by the teacher participants. The positive mean values of pertinent evaluation items and comments from the teacher participants support the effectiveness of these instructional activities for critical thinking and writing. The results of the study may encourage teachers to employ or modify these instructional activities to teach in their writing classes, basic or advanced, and possibly inspire them to create more teaching activities suitable for their own students.

**Key words:** Instructional activities 、 critical thinking 、 critical writing

## INTRODUCTION

In the writing workshop demonstrator's experience, it is difficult to make a writing class enjoyable and critical. In the summer of 2004, the demonstrator was invited to do a workshop in the five-day 2004 Yun-lin Junior High School English Teaching Seminar, Taiwan. For the writing workshop, he produced four instructional activities for teacher participants to think about how to make their English teaching more meaningful and amusing by thinking and writing critically in the workshop. These four activities included Completing Incomplete Jokes, Completing An Incomplete Passage, "Recycling" Writing, and Printed-characters-based Writing (see methodology).

The researchers were interested in the quality of the workshop and the demonstrator's performance, so they intended to explore the workshop data and analyze its results in the hope that teacher readers could get an insight into such a writing workshop, especially the four teaching activities, for their English teaching. Thus, this study aims to investigate whether the participating teachers agreed that the writing workshop with four instructional activities was useful or inspiring in the English writing context.

## CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING THEORIES

The current research study that encompasses this approach to a writing workshop is mainly based on the theories of critical thinking and writing. The demonstrator described these two theories in the beginning of the writing workshop and afterwards encouraged the teacher participants to critically think and write their team tasks. To be critical is not to be negative, aggressive or even to disagree unconditionally, but rather to think differently

(Marchant, 2005) and write creatively. Our students have rich imagination for critical thinking and writing, but this requires instructors to design teaching activities for them to accomplish the goal of critical literacy. Simply put, instructors should imbue students with the power not only to improve their English proficiency, but also to sharpen their thinking and writing skills and even explore how they perceive in the surroundings and the world (Condren, Waldrip, and Knight, 2003).

### Critical thinking

Critical thinking is a form of deep reflection. The essence of critical thinking sheds light on the respect of and reflection on different views from the text or other people. Robert Ennis' definition of critical thinking is "reasonable reflective thinking that is concerned with what to do or believe" (cited in Paul, 1993). Furthermore, Wang, Wang, Wu and Kuo (2004) refer to critical thinking as a reflecting process "in which students are encouraged to brainstorm and create their works on the basis of prior knowledge and experiences, respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, and foster cooperative peer-relationship."

### Critical writing

Critical thinking helps students write critically. In team-writing, students sit near one another, brainstorm together (Bomer and Laman, 2004) based on available prior knowledge and experiences, and transform such knowledge and experiences (George, 2002).

Critical writing can allow students to explore diverse perspectives which a team brainstorms in an instructional activity, thereby building a bridge from their previous schemata to the new meaning-making

(Brozo and Simpson, 1995). Wang, Wang, Wu and Kuo (2004) view critical writing as “a writing process in which students complete tasks in reflective-thinking-oriented course activities.”

Taken altogether, critical thinking and writing encourage students to make sense of their lives in new ways and “cultivate their unique voices” (Kixmiller, 2004, p. 33).

## METHODOLOGY

### Setting

The five-day 2004 Yun-lin Junior High School English Teaching Seminar schedule included (Day 1) Teaching Approaches (morning) and English Songs (afternoon), (Day 2) Sentence Patterns Practice (morning) and Holidays Teaching (afternoon), (Day 3) Reading (a whole day), (Day 4) Writing (morning) and Listening Training (afternoon), and (Day 5) Demonstration (a whole day).

### Informants

The informants included the writing workshop demonstrator and teacher participants. The demonstrator taught writing on Day 4. Since he started to teach in a national university in mid-southern Taiwan two years ago, he has been trying to integrate critical-thinking-and-writing-based activities into English teaching, particularly in English reading and writing courses.

The demonstrator did not call the roll, but he estimated the writing workshop size at 25. The respondents, 22 Mandarin-speaking high school English teachers in Yun-lin County, were the main informants of the study. These were 4 males and 18 females. Three of them had master's degrees; 17 bachelor's degrees; two female respondents did not

disclose their highest educational degrees. Their years of teaching experience ranged from one to over thirty.

### Instructional activities

The following four instructional activities occurred in small groups:

\*Completing incomplete jokes: The teacher participants used their imagination to finish the incomplete jokes on their team joke-sheets to make the jokes reasonable or amusing.

\*Completing an incomplete passage: In small groups, the teacher participants completed the incomplete passages, whose first three sentences were shown, to make them meaningful or intriguing.

\*Recycling writing: The teacher participants recreated their team poems based on pieces of paper with words into which the selected poem had been cut (Wang, 2004), and with three to five blank papers for them to write any extra words necessary for their poems.

\*Printed-characters-based writing: The teacher participants produced their team works by combining any cut words and pictures taken from the English magazines or newspapers.

### Data sources and collection procedures

The instruments for data collection included the researchers' evaluation questionnaire, the organizer's seminar evaluation questionnaire, and the teacher participants' written works produced in small groups in the workshop.

#### *Researchers' evaluation questionnaire*

On an Indiana University Teaching Evaluation basis, the anonymous researchers' evaluation

questionnaire consisted of three parts in English: (1) basic background, (2) ten evaluation items on a 5-point scale, and (3) free comment. Since the mean scores were between 1 (not good at all) and 5 (very good), a mean score higher than 3 indicates the participants' positive attitude towards a certain item, whereas a mean score lower than 3 shows a negative attitude. The questionnaire was administered in a conference room on the last day of the seminar. The participants' responses to the questionnaire items on this rating scale were computed using Excel, but only the result of item 8, "the quality of writing workshop," was analyzed in the next section in that the results of the other items were beyond the scope of this study.

*Organizer's seminar evaluation questionnaire*

The anonymous organizer's seminar evaluation questionnaire consisted of four categories in Chinese: (1) Course workshop: eight evaluation items on a 5-point scale, (2) Courses: four evaluation items on a 5-point scale, (3) Suggestions, and (4) Basic background. Since the mean scores were between 1 (strongly discontented) and 5 (strongly contented), a mean score higher than 3 indicates the respondents' positive attitude towards a certain item, whereas a mean score lower than 3 shows a negative attitude.

Like the researchers' evaluation questionnaire, the organizer's seminar evaluation questionnaire was conducted in the conference room in the closing session. The participants' responses to the questionnaire items on rating scales were computed using Excel, but only the result of item 6, "the performance of the writing workshop demonstrator," in the first category was analyzed in the next section inasmuch as the results of the other items were not related to the current study. .

*Teacher participants' works*

All the works the teacher participants created in these four instructional activities were shown on the screen and discussed in the whole class through a computer and a projector. Several of them were shown for sharing in the next section.

**DISCUSSION**

**Results of two evaluation items**

Table 1 shows that the response number of the researcher's evaluation questionnaire was 22. Among the 22 responses, one was invalid. The mean value of the item about the quality of writing workshop was 4.05.

**Table 1.** Results of the researchers' evaluation item "the quality of writing workshop"

Responses	Valid Responses	Total Value	Mean Value
22	21	85	4.05

Table 2 shows that the response number of the organizer's evaluation questionnaire was only 16. The mean value of the item related to the

performance of the writing workshop demonstrator was 4.25. None of the teacher respondents' suggestions or comments in the third category was related to this study.

**Table 2.** Results of the organizer’s evaluation item  
“the performance of the writing workshop demonstrator”

Responses	Valid Responses	Total Value	Mean Value
16	16	68	4.25

Even though the mean values, 4.05 in Table 1 and 4.25 in Table 2, are not strongly high, the scores still indicate that the teacher respondents tended to

regard the quality of the workshop as good and were content with the demonstrator’s performance.

**Table 3.** Results of the rating scaled data (from the researchers’ evaluation questionnaire)

Rating	5	4	3	2	1	Total
Responses	6	10	5	0	0	21
(Percent)	(28.6%)	(47.6%)	(23.8%)	(0%)	(0%)	(100%)
Total	30	40	15	0	0	85

\*5: Very good; 4: Good; 3: Average; 2: Room for improvement; 1: Not good at all

More specifically, Table 3 shows that no respondents thought that the writing workshop was not good at all or had room for improvement, 10 respondents (47.6%) and 6 respondents (28.6%) referred to the writing workshop as good and very good respectively, and 5 respondents (23.8%) considered the workshop average.

“discontented” with the performance of the writing workshop demonstrator, 10 respondents (62.5 %) and 5 respondents (31.2 %) were “contented” and “strongly contented” respectively, and only one (6.3 %) considered the demonstrator’s performance average.

Furthermore, Table 4 shows that no respondents were “strongly discontented” or

**Table 4.** Results of the rating scaled data  
(from the organizer’s seminar evaluation questionnaire)

Rating	5	4	3	2	1	Total
Responses	5	10	1	0	0	16
(Percent)	(31.2%)	(62.5%)	(6.3%)	(0%)	(0%)	(100%)
Total	25	40	3	0	0	68

\* 5: Strongly Contented; 4: Contented; 3: Just fine; 2: Discontented; 1: Strongly Discontented

In summary, Table 3 and Table 4 indicate that no teacher respondents (0%) denied the quality of the writing workshop and the performance of the

demonstrator, and the teacher respondents tended to have a positive attitude toward the writing workshop, so the workshop was basically a success.

### Teacher respondents' comments

The following pieces are excerpts from the teacher respondents' comments on and suggestions about the whole writing workshop in the researchers' evaluation questionnaire. These excerpts support the quality of the writing workshop and the performance of the demonstrator. One suggestion about the length of each activity and the introduction of more teaching ideas means a lot to the demonstrator and the researchers.

1. It's well prepared, and some of the ideas are useful in middle school.
2. Clear and some techniques are practical.
3. A nice speaker is very important to me. I love this seminar.
4. Please shorten the time of doing these activities. The activities are helpful for practicing English, but they take too much time. Please give us more ideas to do activities.
5. It's practical & useful.
6. helpful in teaching.
7. Professor Wang is very kind and friendly. The practice is very practical.
8. Teacher is friendly, and that make[s] students comfortable.
9. Very interesting.

### Teacher participants' works

The following are sample works produced by teacher participants in the four instructional activities, which should amply illustrate the effectiveness of the writing workshop.

#### *Completing Incomplete Jokes*

The non-underlined parts were chosen from the book (Jokes 1-9), *Popular jokes in English* by Woolard

(1991), and the demonstrator's experience (Joke 10); the underlined parts were created by the teacher participants:

1. How do you know when you are getting old?
  - a. When I am getting old, I'll become richer. And when I am richer, I can get more handsome boyfriends.
  - b. When you ask me this question, I know it.
  - c. When a mosquito dies on my face.
  - d. When I don't have any desire, I know I'm getting old.
2. Teacher: Peter, say something beginning with "I."  
Peter : I is ...  
Teacher: No, No. You must say "I am."
  - a. Peter : All right. I am all right.
  - b. Peter : All right. I am the ninth letter in English.
  - c. Peter : All right. I am eager for your touch.
3. How do you get rid of varnish?
  - a. Sorry, I don't want to get rid of varnish.
  - b. When I sweat.
  - c. Just eat it.
4. Where can you always find happiness?
  - a. I can find happiness while sleeping.
  - b. In the dictionary.
  - c. I can find happiness in deep sorrow.
5. Patient: I think I've got a cold.  
Doctor: Well, put your head out of the window and stick your tongue out.  
Patient: Will that make me any better?
  - a. Doctor: No, but that makes me better.
  - b. Doctor: No, but you'll get two colds.
  - c. Doctor: No, but that makes you look better.
  - d. Doctor: No, but you'll know what's real cold.
  - e. Doctor: No, but dogs always do so and feel better.
6. Two boys sat down in an expensive café, took out their sandwiches from their schoolbags and began to eat. A waiter saw them and shouted, "Hey, you

can't eat your own food in here.”

- a. So they changed their sandwiches each other.
  - b. So the two boys “SWALLOW” their own food.
  - c. So you meant we could eat other people's food in here.
  - d. So they started to eat their schoolbags.
  - e. So the two boys gave one to the waiter.
7. When is the cheapest time to telephone your friends?
- a. When I have the lottery.
  - b. When they are free.
  - c. When the telephone is out of order.
  - d. When my friends are taking a shower.
8. - It's my twenty-first wedding anniversary today.  
- Congratulations.
- a. -Yes. But we maybe get divorced tomorrow.
  - b. -Yes. And it's also the last one.
  - c. -Yes. My husband has been dead for twenty-one years.
  - d. -Yes. But I celebrated my anniversaries with different husbands.
  - e. -Yes. But I'll marry again tomorrow.
9. What do you pay in school?
- a. Attention.
  - b. A lot of things, such as time, future and dignity.
  - c. Professors' children's tuitions.
  - d. Sweat and blood.
10. The demonstrator's experience:  
Chen: I had my hair cut yesterday. Don't you think I look younger today?
- a. Peter: Oh, OK. But you still have more white hair than I.
  - b. Peter: Oh, OK. You look as young as your father.
  - c. Peter: Oh, OK. But you get older and older every moment.
  - d. Peter: Oh, OK. You look younger today than tomorrow.

*Completing an Incomplete Passage*

The non-underlined parts were chosen from the article entitled “The psychic rewards of teaching: An interview with James E. Alatis” (Ancker, 2004); the underlined parts were created by the teacher participants. The first and the third passages are about real friends, while the second one is about a friend-like wife.

1. She is one of my best friends and she exerts such influence on me that we have much in common. Everytime I stay with her, I feel we have a lot to communicate with. In a sense, she is more than a friend to me. When I am in trouble, she comes to me. When I am in deep sorrow, she comforts me. When I need someone to talk to, she always listens to me. We share all the happiness and sadness with each other. No matter what comes tomorrow, I believe our friendship will keep forever.
2. She is one of my best friends and she exerts such influence on me that we have much in common. Everytime I stay with her, I feel we have a lot to communicate with. In a sense, she is more than a friend to me. When I am down, she can tell me something interesting. If I have done good jobs, she will give me a hug and a wonderful kiss. When I am angry she will tell me jokes and sings to me. When I do something wrong, she will cry. Besides, she wakes me up, prepares three meals for me, washes clothes, and takes good care of our children, I love her so much. She is my only love. She is my wife.
3. She is one of my best friends and she exerts such influence on me that we have much in common. Everytime I stay with her, I feel we have a lot to communicate with. In a sense, she is more than a friend to me. She is like a teacher in my life. For example, when I encounter the difficulties, she will give me some concrete suggestions and that make

me get over them.

In addition, we like to go to the scary movies, and we both like to cover our faces and scream when something disgusting appears. That can let the pressure in our hearts out.

In a word, she is the one who will be by my side through good times and bad times, and she will be the one who will accompany me through

the journey of my life.

“Recycling” Writing (see Appendix )

The following works depict the theme of friendship in their voices of hope and encouragement.

### Writing 1. Friendship

May always gives others something new about smiles  
 I have become planting seeds to make dreams come  
 I am trying to believe that the change of  
 rainbows will have a wonderful blossom tomorrows  
 Because you hope to keep friendship to be  
 meaningful  
 Some friends will envision days to come longer  
 tomorrow, others will search for the busy day  
 to keep thinking as a true diary

P.1.

the days become meaningful  
 our lives are full of hope  
 they'll go to see the rainbows tomorrow  
 May gives me friendship as a gift  
 I am busy  
 May you keep in touch  
 May you have the wonderful day  
 May reassured all things  
 our beauty is really gone  
 do you page May again.  
 And then what comes

### Writing 2: A letter to a friend

Dear friend,

I believe tomorrow will be another new day for us seasons  
 change things. But if you keep believing beauty remains you  
 will happily find something wonderful and meaningful in  
 your heart after the rain come the rainbows and you  
 may see the flowers in full blossom and find the smiles on  
 the faces of your friends. when days are gone our dreams  
 will come true. try to envision the best may follow you and  
 me May our friendship keep longer.

Yours,

May

Printed-characters-based Writing

Figure 1 addresses the joy of bicycling in France, and figure 2 merry Christmas.

Figure 1: Bicycling in France

**BICYCLING** **G** *in*  
**FRANCE**

**W**ho could refuse to love France?

France has its own special dishes. Most famous are the tasty salads, soups, sauces and *pastries*.

**W**hat are the most popular kinds of transportation?

In 1868, the first bicycle race took place in Paris, France. Today's best known bicycle race is held in that same country.

People use bicycles to get to a wide variety of places.

Bicycles are popular.

for example.

- fits through small spaces
- easy to park
- doesn't pollute the air
- a good way to exercise

Eiffel Tower.

Get out your bicycle and start riding. Hours of excitement and fun are waiting for you.

Figure 2: Merry X'mas



## CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION AND WEAKNESS

It follows from Tables 1-4 that the teacher respondents had a positive attitude toward the quality of the four instructional activities and the demonstrator's performance in the writing workshop, which is also supported by the excerpts from the teacher respondents. The works created by the teacher participants show their critical thinking and writing skills in these teaching activities. More specifically, in the team work, the teacher participants shared their previous knowledge and experiences, responded mindfully to different views, develop cooperative peer-relationship, and produce their own team voices.

Through this study, the demonstrator understands the strengths and weakness of the writing workshop. He can take into consideration one teacher participant's suggestion regarding shortening the time

of each activity to introduce more instructional ideas.

This study is also significant in that it focuses upon the effectiveness of critical teaching activities on writing ability. The results of the study open a window for instructors to think critically about how to integrate critical literacy into English writing classes. In other words, this study offers awareness into the possibility of promoting students' English writing ability through critical teaching activities.

On the other hand, the researchers should have generated four more questionnaire items for the four instructional activities and should have had the teacher participants scale them; that is, the quality of Completing Incomplete Jokes, the quality of Completing An Incomplete Passage, the quality of "Recycling" Writing, and the quality of Printed-characters-based Writing. The results of these four items would have made the study more in-depth and academic. As such, the interested researchers may further work on the effectiveness of these four

instructional activities respectively and how the participants respond to each.

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## APPENDIX : Sample poem for the "Recycling" Writing activity

May you know, in your heart, that others are always thinking of you.

May you always have rainbows that follow the rain.

May you celebrate the wonderful things about you.

And when tomorrow comes, may you do it all over again.

May you remember how full of smiles the days can be.

May you believe that what you search for, you will see.

May you find time to smell the flowers, and find time to share the beauty of you.

May you envision today as a gift, and tomorrow as another.

May you add a meaningful page to the diary of each new day,

and may you make "living happily ever after..." something that will really come true.

And may you always keep planting the seeds of your dreams.

Because if you keep believing in them, they'll keep trying their best... to blossom for you.

Source:

McCarty, C. (1990). When life isn't easy, may you remember this.... In S. P. Schutz (Ed.), *Life can be hard sometimes...but it's going to be okay* (pp. 8-9). Boulder, CO: Blue Mountain Press.

## 提昇創意思考與寫作能力之教學活動

王清煌 吳宜諮 方月秋 王生美

國立虎尾科技大學應用外語系

### 摘 要

2004 年暑假，一位講師在臺灣雲林縣古坑國中，負責一場寫作工作坊，為與會的老師們介紹了四種教學活動，這些中學的英語老師，大都相當認真地去思考、討論並完成小組的英文寫作。該場寫作工作坊長約三個半小時。這些教學活動以創意思考與寫作理論為基礎，包括：完成未完成的笑話(Completing Incomplete Jokes)，完成未完成的段落(Completing An Incomplete Passage)，"重置"寫作("Recycling" Writing)，和剪貼鉛字寫作(Printed-characters-based Writing)。本文選錄幾篇與會老師們創意的作品，以茲見證和分享。對此寫作工作坊，老師們所給的高分數和許多正面的評語，足以證明這些教學活動有助於提昇創意思考與寫作之能力。本文希望老師們能參考或修改這些教學活動，實際應用在他們的基礎或進階的寫作課程裡，更希望他們能由此創造更多適合他們自己學生的教學活動。

**關鍵字：**教學活動、創意思考，創意寫作。

