
THE LEARNER DEVELOPMENT JOURNAL

学習者ディベロップメント研究部会誌

ISSN: 2433-5401

<https://ldjournal.ld-sig.org>

The Learner Development Journal Issue 9:
Engaging With and Exploring Autonomy, Creativity, and Well-Being
for Learner Development

Author: Nathan Cohen

Title: Creative Speaking: A Practice-Related Review of “Creativity Through Inquiry Dialogue” (Chappell, 2016) in *Creativity in Language Teaching* (Jones & Richards, 2016)

Date of publication online: December 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTSIG.LDJ9-7>

Author contact: <naverycohen(at)gmail(dot)com>

Published by the Japan Association for Language Teaching
Learner Development Special Interest Group, Tokyo

<https://ld-sig.org/>

Copyright 2025 each respective author

This article can be cited as:

Cohen, N. (2025). Creative speaking: A practice-related review of “Creativity through inquiry dialogue” (Chappell, 2016) in *Creativity in Language Teaching* (Jones & Richards, 2016). *The Learner Development Journal*, 9, 102–110. <https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTSIG.LDJ9-7>

This article is part of a collection of practitioner research on the theme of “Engaging With and Exploring Autonomy, Creativity, and Well-Being for Learner Development” for Issue 9 of the Learner Development Journal (LDJ9), edited by Stacey Vye, Robert Moreau, and Ivan Lombardi. Published once a year, each issue of the Learner Development Journal follows a Community of Practices approach over a period of approximately 18 months in which contributors work together, under the guidance of the editors, to share, respond to, and develop their research and writing.

Articles are published in the Learner Development Journal under a Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY), of which CC BY 4.0 is the most recent version. Under this agreement, authors grant users the right to unrestricted dissemination and re-use of the work. They ask only that proper attribution is given to the work.

Creative Speaking: A Practice-Related Review of “Creativity Through Inquiry Dialogue” (Chappell, 2016) in *Creativity in Language Teaching* (Jones & Richards, 2016)¹

Reviewed by **Nathan Cohen**, British Council, Da Nang, Viet Nam
<naverycohen(at)gmail(dot)com>

This practice-related review explores the link between creativity and language learning and teaching, drawing on *Creativity in Language Teaching* (Jones & Richards, 2016) and especially Chappell's (2016) concept of creativity through inquiry dialogue. The author expands on the theoretical framework behind this concept in order to provide the reader with a clearer understanding of how dialogue can be differentiated from other kinds of classroom speech due to five key qualities that it possesses: collectiveness, reciprocity, supportiveness, cumulation, and purposefulness (Alexander 2008b). Of these, the fourth quality of cumulation is particularly highlighted for its importance to inquiry and creative expression. The author then provides illustrations of these concepts from personal experience as a language learner and teacher, to illuminate how this sort of “creative speaking” might facilitate language acquisition and learner development. The review concludes with three suggestions for everyday practice which may facilitate this sort of creative dialogue in the TESOL classroom.

本実践的書評は、創造性と言語学習・教育の関連を探るものである。Jones & Richards (2016) の『Creativity in Language Teaching』、とりわけ Chappell (2016) が提唱する探究的対話を通じた創造性という概念に焦点を当てる。著者は、対話が他の教室での発話と区別されるのかについて読者の理解を深めるため、この概念の背景にある理論的枠組みを展開している。その区別の根拠として、Alexander (2008b) による対話の5つの重要な特質である、集合性、相互性、支持性、累積性、目的性を挙げている。これらの中で、4番目の累積性は、探究と創造的表現にとって重要であるとして特に強調されている。著者は、言語学習者および教師としての個人的経験に基づく実例を提示することで、「クリエイティブ・スピーキング」がいかに言語習得と学習者の成長を促進し得るかについて例示する。最後に、TESOL (英語教授法) の教室においてこのような創造的対話を促進するための日常的な実践に向けた3つの提言を行う。

Keywords

creativity, dialogic pedagogy, speaking, second language acquisition

創造性、対話型教授法、スピーキング、第二言語習得

Creativity has been an interest of mine throughout my career as a language teacher. When my lessons are more creative, it has been my intuition that the learners not only have more fun, but actually learn more language. I wanted to know why this seemed to be the case, and whether there was any research to substantiate my intuitions, so I read *Creativity in Language Teaching* (Jones & Richards, 2016b); it is my intention in this article to share what I found there. Reading this book, I was struck especially by the chapter “Creativity through Inquiry Dialogue,” which I began to link to the idea of “creative speaking,” and specifically to practices for TESOL inspired by the creative spoken arts, such as stand-up comedy and improv theatre. In what follows, I will briefly review the texts I have just outlined above, and conclude with suggestions for practices that might be useful in facilitating creative language learning and teaching.

1. R. H. Jones & J. C. Richards, Routledge, 2016. 284 pages. ISBN 9781138843653. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315730936>

Overview of Creativity in Language Teaching

In *Creativity in Language Teaching*, Richards and Jones (2016b) have collected articles from 20 teachers and researchers in order to explore why creativity might be useful in language education, as well as how it might be fostered in teaching practice, curriculum design, and teacher development. They suggest that creativity is particularly important in language teaching because creativity prepares learners to cope with the “novel and unpredictable” (Jones & Richards, 2016b, p. 2) experience of communicating with strangers in a foreign language. They note that creative teaching requires teachers to be reflective and intuitive enough to attend to what is happening in the classroom; flexible enough to make adjustments when needed; but also confident enough to trust their own knowledge and judgment (Richards & Jones, 2016a).

In practice, though, the question remains: How can I teach reflectively, intuitively, and with confidence? Or to put it another way: Is there any sort of approach or practices I can apply that will help me teach more creatively? In the chapter “Creativity through Inquiry Dialogue,” I believe I have found an answer to these sorts of practical questions. Before turning to this text, however, I would also like to reflect on my own intuitions on creativity and language learning and teaching, which I believe might dovetail usefully with the theory of creative dialogue, outlined by Chappell (2016) in his chapter.

View From Experience

At the start of this review, I noted my intuition—which I have harbored as far back as I can remember in my 20-year teaching career—that creativity is somehow crucial for language acquisition. This intuition is, for me, bound up inextricably with my more-than-20-year career as a language learner. I will describe here briefly my experience in both of these interrelated careers, with the hope that my experiences may serve as a useful example of some of the theoretical concepts described by Chappell.

My language learning career began not long after receiving my Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA) in Hanoi, where I started learning Vietnamese at a university across the street from the language center where I had my first teaching post. The lessons at this university were of the old-fashioned, drill-and-repeat variety. Nonetheless, I kept showing up for years: drilling, repeating, and expectantly hoping that I would speak good Vietnamese one day.

My beliefs about language learning at that time were similar to those of many of my students: I thought that language learning was hard work, like physical exercise; and that all I had to do was just work out as hard and consistently as possible. Nowadays, I do not think those beliefs were wrong exactly, but I do think they were incomplete. Just like how there is much more to exercise than lifting with maximum intensity; for instance, the need for sufficient rest, adequate nutrition, or a positive mindset. I realized over the years that there is much more to learning to speak a foreign language than just maximizing hours of controlled practice.

Nothing made this clearer to me than my experience learning Arabic when, about a decade later, I was teaching in Saudi Arabia. Unlike Vietnamese, I made little concerted effort to learn Arabic when I moved to the country. I signed up for a course in my first few months there, but I found the squiggly script indecipherable and quickly gave up. However, to my surprise, over time, I began to develop a reputation at my language center for telling Arabic jokes that the Saudis call *samaja* (سماجة): groan-inducing puns, which are so terrible they get a laugh. In English these might be called “dad jokes;” here is a classic

example: "Do you think this is too much... or *three* much?" After a few years, I could rattle off dozens of silly jokes like this, in a pidgin of English and Saudi Arabic. What was most striking to me was that by playing around and having fun with a language I was not even trying to learn I was able—somehow—to start speaking that language, to the extent that at times I found myself having short conversations with my students in Arabic.

This experience was for me, poetic, in the Aristotelian sense: It was something I could not have imagined beforehand, but in retrospect cannot imagine happening any other way (Owen, 1961). It has also strongly informed my teaching: It has become my practice to foreground fun and creativity in my own lesson plans wherever possible, as it has been my experience that lessons which are boring and uncreative, no matter how potentially useful, are usually forgotten. After reading Chappell's "Creativity through Inquiry Dialogue" chapter, I believe that I have found a theoretical framework that might help us understand why learning and teaching in this sort of atmosphere of playfulness, humor, and creativity leads to the acquisition of language.

Review: Creativity Through Inquiry Dialogue

In "Creativity through Inquiry Dialogue," Chappell (2016) outlines how we might teach speaking creatively through an approach which he terms "inquiry dialogue." Chappell is referring specifically to Robin Alexander's theory of dialogic pedagogy (Alexander, 2008b). It may be useful to expand briefly on this pedagogical theory in order for us to better understand what Chappell means by inquiry dialogue, and how this sort of dialogue might relate to creativity in language learning.

Dialogic pedagogy originated in a case study of classroom talk carried out in England, France, India, Russia, and the United States over several years (Alexander, 2001). What emerged from that study was that it is the quality rather than the quantity of talk, which correlated most noticeably to improved learning outcomes. Alexander calls this kind of high-quality classroom talk "inquiry dialogue" and defines it as being:

1. Collective (i.e., everyone has an opportunity to speak);
2. Reciprocal (i.e., speaker(s) and listener(s) take turns speaking and listening to each other);
3. Supportive (i.e., mistakes and tangents are welcomed rather than shut down);
4. Cumulative (i.e., what is said next is linked to what has been said before);
5. Purposeful (i.e., the talk aims towards a particular end-goal).

(Alexander, 2008b, pp. 112-113)

It is the fourth quality of cumulation, of "mutual guiding and prompting, where each [speaker] builds on the others' contributions" (Chappell, 2016, p. 139) that Alexander and Chappell identify as the most crucial to dialogue (Alexander, 2008a).

Teachers often encourage their learners to speak and listen to each other, collectively and reciprocally. Many teachers create a supportive atmosphere in the classroom, and most classroom talk at least begins with some sort of purpose in mind. However, Alexander (2008c) suggests that the talk in many classrooms is rarely if ever cumulative: Learners and teachers often have the experience that they are talking *at* each other, rather than *to* or *with* each other.

Noticing this distinction between talking-at and talking-to was also critical to me in my own development as a language teacher. Early in my career, whenever the learners spoke, I would often say something like "I understand" or "I see" after every student's utterance. I said these phrases because I had been trained to say something supportive whenever students spoke. I rarely said much more than "I see" because I had also been trained to

keep teacher talk to a minimum. I didn't realize how this might make learners feel like they were talking *at* their teacher until one of them, one day, made a joke: "Teacher... What do you see?" As everyone giggled, something clicked for me: There is a world of difference between someone telling you "I see" and feeling seen. This is the difference between what Alexander (2008c) terms "mere conversation" and meaningful dialogue, as he suggests, without meaningful dialogue, there is little room for curiosity, surprise, or creativity. And consequently, there is little room for learning.

Chappell applies Alexander's (2008a) theory to TESOL by suggesting that talk which is not cumulative limits language learning. Chappell suggests that, in the TESOL classroom, such non-cumulative talk often falls into a cycle of Imitation-Response-Feedback (IRF) (Chappell, 2016; Lemke, 1991). Instead of building on what emerges organically, this sort of classroom talk is directed as quickly as possible to the target language and the answer key. Chappell provides an example of this, where two students and a teacher check their comprehension of a listening text:

R: And what was the topic about?

L: I think I think it sounds like it make a lot of people er people thought that the earth was being invade

R: invaded

L: invaded by aliens

R: Uhu

L: What do you think?

R: I think it's two reasons one because of the broadcast because of the sound of the broadcast it seemed real

L: (nodding head) hm hm

R: the story the drama that was played was very short

L: Uhu

R: and the second, at the time world politic the Europeans was starting to join World War II . . . so the people seems insecurity

L: (nodding head) Hm. Hmm.

T: OK. Let's have some answers. (Chappell 2016, p. 138)

Chappell invites us to compare this with a very similar talk, but where cumulation—rather than "some answers"—is guiding the conversation:

T: What do you think about these people and their life?

S1: I think they falling in love

(Group laughter)

T: Falling in love. OK. So maybe what, not married yet?

Ss: No. Not yet (in unison)

T: So I wonder. They still love each other. They're not fighting yet.

Ss: (Group laughter)

S6: Maybe fighting already

S5: And the guy that man asks for maybe asks for one more chance.

S4: Forgive me.

(Group laughter)

T: I'm sorry. I won't do it again.

(Group laughs loudly)

S1: Maybe they are not a couple

S2: Det det

T: Det

S3: signals circles with hand

S2: Deting

T: Dating. They're dating. OK. Do you think they're working or students?

S2: University.

T: University.

S5: How about lady is a student and man is a teacher?

(Group laughs loudly)

T: I don't I don't think so because usually the

S5: Yeah she looks young (group laughter)

T: yeah but the problem is that usually the teachers are more handsome than this

(Group laughter and groans) (Chappell, 2016, p. 140)

In the first talk, the learners play a version of what Alexander (2001) calls the game of "guess-what's-in-the-teacher's-mind." Neither the teacher nor the learners engage with what their interlocutors are actually saying about aliens or World War II. Instead, all of them are just waiting to hear someone say the correct answer. Nothing surprising happens in this talk. Therefore, why would anyone listen, most especially the teacher, who has quite possibly listened to this exact same talk many times in other lessons? The poet Robert Frost (1939)

once wrote: “No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader” (p. 1). I would suggest a similar formulation when teaching language: no surprise for the teacher, no surprise for the learners.

In the second talk, by contrast, we can see surprises emerging and being engaged with at almost every turn. The talk is noticeably funnier: Both the learners and teacher get in a few jokes. Humorousness is often an emergent quality of inquiry dialogue: The teacher and learners take turns engaging with and inquiring about what the others have said, and so they laugh, because what the other has to say is often not what they expected.

This is why an ethos of inquiry dialogue can facilitate creativity. The teacher and learners in this example could not have known where the conversation would go when it started. It is my suggestion that this sort of dialogue could also be called “creative speaking,” because a very similar ethos can be found in the creative arts. Cumulation is the most well-known rule of improv theatre: In order for the show to go on, the actors must always say “Yes, and...” to whatever starts emerging on the stage (Kaufman, 2024).

Creative Dialogue in Practice, or: Creative Speaking

The question which I would like to turn to now is: Just how might we apply this to everyday practice? I would like to suggest in the following section two routines and one specific activity that have facilitated this kind of talk in my own teaching practice.

Unprompted Talks & Recapping

I use the term “unprompted talks” to refer to a form of activity that I learned early on in my career, at the institution where I worked in Vietnam. There our learners studied for a foundation year before continuing on to undergraduate or graduate studies overseas. In an unprompted talk, students would be given one minute to prepare a one-minute talk about a topic, such as, “Toys,” a prompt, or, “Talk about a time when you had a problem using technology,” or an argument, such as, “Climate change is the most important issue in the world today. Explain why you disagree.” Students would then pair up and spend one minute each talking to, or perhaps at each other.

I would suggest these sorts of talks can be specifically framed in two ways to benefit the development of an atmosphere of creativity and dialogue. First, unprompted talks should be routine: At least one talk should be included in every single lesson. This routine can be further emphasized by encouraging learners to keep an unprompted talk diary, recording what topics they talked about in each English lesson.

By making this kind of talk a routine, there are obviously more opportunities for speaking, and therefore more opportunities to develop learners’ spoken confidence in a *collective* and *supportive* atmosphere of reciprocal conversation. However, one might reasonably ask whether these sorts of unprompted talks by themselves would embody the other aspects of inquiry dialogue, which crucially relate to creativity: *cumulation* and *purposefulness*. This is where *recapping* (Huang, 2019)—the second key technique of this practice—comes into play.

After the learners have finished speaking with each other, there are many ways to close out this sort of activity. Early on in my own career, I would often call on a learner or two and ask them to share with the class what they talked about. I would suggest that this typical wind-down question can be reframed in one crucial way, by asking: “What did *your partner* talk about?” By encouraging learners to recap what they just heard, rather than repeat what they just said. I have found the nature of this entire activity is subtly but profoundly shifted, and the other aspects of inquiry dialogue almost immediately become relevant.

Recapping what someone just told someone else requires *reciprocity*: Listening to the other person is a necessary requirement to successfully rephrasing what they just spoke about. Moreover, inevitably—even among L1 speakers—we tend to make errors when recapping what another person has said: We misremember details, misunderstand intentions, and misconstrue nuances of language. Repairing these “misses” between what one partner said and the other partner heard is a natural way of creating the links, which make cumulative and meaningful interactions. Often, the first time I invite students to recap an unprompted talk, the listening partner will begin to fidget, or shake their head, or make a face as they listen, and this is where I will gently invite them to jump in, to add corrections, or fill in missing details. Sometimes, the recapper, now listening, might disagree and attempt to correct these corrections. As the teacher, I (and the learners) may feel it is my job to step in to clear things up; but this sort of back-and-forth between “No, that’s not what I said” and “No, that’s not what that means,” but I would suggest (and would encourage my learners to consider) that the purpose of these recapping interactions is not determining who is right, but rather discovering what we might learn while we are engaged in a creative speaking process of getting the story straight.

Beginning Every Class With a Joke

When I was an undergraduate at the University of Washington in Seattle, a professor told me that the Talmud, the ancient Hebrew book of wisdom, states that every class should begin with a joke (this was itself possibly a joke.) In my own experience, telling and understanding jokes is another way in which teachers can create opportunities for creative speaking, particularly for learners at more advanced levels who may find themselves stuck at the intermediate plateau. I would suggest that this is because telling and understanding jokes is quite possibly one of the most difficult things to do in a second language (Ahn, 2016). Moreover, jokes, almost by definition, possess what Chappell calls the “subverting function” of inquiry dialogue: They shift the tenor of the conversation, opening it up to the unexpected (Chappell, 2016, p. 139). Thus, what follows is my own suggestions towards what might be called inquiry dialogue through stand-up comedy.

The first joke that the teacher tells will need to be carefully chosen to be at or near the learners’ level. Jokes that rely on onomatopoeia (like the one about the cow that gets on a crowded bus... “Mooooove”) have often worked well in my own practice as opening jokes.

It is possible the first joke will get no laughs. Either way, after telling the joke, the teacher can start with a recapping question focusing on gist rather than on humor, such as: “What did you hear?”

I often encourage learners to recap the joke to themselves by, first, writing their own recap for a minute or two, and then sharing what they think they heard with a partner or in groups. Much like when recapping a talk with a partner, gaps between what learners may have thought they heard and what the teacher has said may become visible. Once the gist of the joke has been established, another useful line of inquiry can be to explore why the learners thought the joke was (or wasn’t) funny.

The teacher can continue to do this opening-joke routine themselves, but I have found that the most interesting conversations begin to emerge when learners are invited to open the class with jokes of their own. I would strongly recommend that the teacher never forces learners to take on the joke-telling role unless and until they feel ready to do so. Joke-telling is not only linguistically difficult, but can often be psychologically stressful. As Chappell (2016)

and Alexander (2008a) noted above, a supportive atmosphere is crucial for the development of creative speaking and meaningful dialogue in the classroom.

Chappell also observes about dialogue in general that it is important for the teacher to be particularly mindful with jokes in the classroom. A joke, like inquiry dialogue, is almost by definition subversive: It opens up to the unexpected (Chappell, 2016, p. 139). For this reason, there is potentially a risk of the wrong joke causing unexpected harm. Cultural differences in terms of what is and is not acceptable to joke about can be considerable, so I would suggest that for any teacher thinking of adopting this practice, make sure to screen jokes before telling them in class. In monolingual contexts, consider telling any joke you would like to try out with the class to a speaker of the learners' first language, such as a patient colleague who does not mind hearing your jokes. In contexts where the learners speak different L1s, it may not be possible to try out every joke from every cultural/linguistic perspective. In either case, it is the responsibility of the teacher to be aware of the cultural norms and institutional rules relating to speech in the classroom, and ensure that any jokes remain within these boundaries. I knew of one teacher who was accused of *lèse-majesté* for joking about new traffic regulations. When in doubt, stick to silly puns and talking cows.

Conclusion

Early in my own language learning and teaching career, I developed an intuition that we learn to speak by engaging in what I have come to call "creative speaking," by playing around with the language, without the expectation or even perhaps the awareness that we are learning a language while we do so. It has been my intention in this review to follow up on this intuition by reviewing *Creativity in Language Teaching*, and particularly Chappell's (2016) chapter "Creativity through Inquiry Dialogue," which shows how a pedagogical shift towards this kind of creative dialogue can open opportunities for language learning. In this practice-related review, I have attempted to clarify Chappell's theoretical framework by drawing on my own examples and experiences, while also illustrating how this sort of dialogical approach might be applied in practice. By doing so, it is my hope that other teachers and learners may find these ideas useful in exploring how to foster creative speaking in their own learning and teaching journeys.

Review Process

This article was blind peer-reviewed by members of the Learner Development Journal Review Network. (*Contributors have the option of open or blind peer review.*)

Author Bio

Nathan Cohen has been a language learner and teacher for more than 20 years in the United States, Vietnam, and Saudi Arabia. He currently works as an assessment specialist for Cambridge ESOL and the British Council. From April 2026, he will be teaching at Tokyo International University. His research interests include the psychology of language learning, international education, and language assessment.

Nathan Cohenは言語学習者であり、米国、ベトナム、サウジアラビアにおいて20年以上にわたり、教師としての経験を持つ。現在は、ケンブリッジESOLおよびブリティッシュ・カウンシルにてアセスメント・スペシャリストとして勤務している2026年4月より東京国際大学にて教鞭を執る予定である。言語学習の心理学、国際教育、および言語評価の研究に関心がある。

References

- Ahn, S. (2016). Bridging notions of language play and language awareness. *Humor*, 29(4), 539–554. <https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2016-0004>
- Alexander, R. (2001). *Culture and pedagogy: International comparisons in primary education*. Blackwell.
- Alexander, R. (2008a). Culture, dialogue and learning: Notes on an emerging pedagogy. In N. Mercer & S. Hodgkinson (Eds.), *Culture, dialogue and learning: Notes on an emerging pedagogy* (pp. 91–114). Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446279526.n6>
- Alexander, R. (2008b). *Essays on pedagogy*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203609309>
- Alexander, R. (2008c). *Towards dialogic teaching: Rethinking classroom talk* (4th ed.). Dialogos.
- Owen, G. L. E. (1961). Aristotle. *Analytic Philosophy*, 2(1), 17–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0149.1961.tb02109.x>
- Chappell, P. (2015). Creativity through inquiry dialogue. In R. H. Jones & J. C. Richards (2016), *Creativity in language teaching: perspectives from research and practice* (pp. 130–145). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315730936-9>
- Frost, R. (1939). The figure a poem makes. In *Collected poems of Robert Frost*. Halcyon House.
- Huang, A. (2019). The dialogical nature of language use in interactive listening: Revisiting meaning in context. *Language Awareness*, 29(1), 21–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2019.1686509>
- Jones, R. H., & Richards, J. C.. (2016a). Creativity and language teaching. In *Creativity in language teaching: Perspectives from research and practice* (pp. 3–15). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315730936-1>
- Jones, R. H., & Richards, J. C.. (2016b). *Creativity in language teaching: Perspectives from research and practice*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315730936>
- Kaufman, S. (2024). Yes, and: The psychology of improv comedy. In *The Psychology Podcast with Scott Barry Kaufman* [Audio podcast]. <https://scottbarrykaufman.com/podcast/yes-and-the-psychology-of-improv-comedy/>
- Lemke, J. L. (1991). Talking science: Language, learning, and values. *Choice Reviews Online*, 28(9), 28–5211. <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.28-5211>