

Creative Ways of Teaching Research Paper Writing

by Alejandro S. Bernardo

University of Santo Tomas

Abstract

Research paper writing remains an uninteresting and unexciting activity for many university students. They may not have realized its indispensable value in their respective disciplines and target workplaces. Hence, teachers must provide more enticing and more motivating classroom-based writing tasks to spur students' interest in producing varied academic texts. It is in this light that this paper proposes a number of "fun tasks" that teachers may use as their pre-writing tasks, lesson springboards or enrichment exercises when they teach the rudiments of academic writing or research paper production. The use of these "fun tasks" is based on the premise that cultivating students' interest in research largely depends on the creativity of the teachers and the appeal of classroom activities and that learning could better take place when students are motivated and when they enjoy the learning process at the same time.

Introduction

University education requires students to produce academic papers not only in English courses but also in other disciplines. But soon after the opening of the classes, teachers would often observe that the previously thrill-filled classroom is painted with boredom, passiveness and lack of enthusiasm when they start teaching the rigors of research paper writing. Writing an academic paper remains a difficult, trying, and intimidating task for learners (Millions, 2008; Abelos, Basbas, Gamboa, Alfonso, & Ligawen, 2008) and they sometimes associate research paper production merely with voluminous references and a semester of sleepless nights.

The foregoing observation is saddening since most of the courses a student will take while in a university require research paper writing as a scholarly exercise. In the university where the present writer is currently teaching, for instance, many students feel inundated and beleaguered by the procedure, especially when they have to repeatedly revise their drafts. They usually have to cram and rush to hand in their term or library papers on time because they lack the motivation to start their writing earlier. As expected, the cramming and rushing frequently results in research papers that are poorly developed both in content and form.

It is true that academic writing could sometimes be a daunting task, but learning its basics and conventions may be better facilitated if it is made fun and easier for the students. Students would like their research paper writing to be taught in classes that incorporate fun and exciting activities and they become uninterested and unresponsive if the classes are taught in the “traditional way” – purely esoteric lectures, no individual or group games, no internet use, no outside-the-classroom tasks. Lengeling and Malarcher (1997) strongly recommend that teachers resort to games to complement their lesson plans in the ESL classroom. They argue that these games will provide the students with many benefits ranging from cognitive aspects of language learning to more cooperative group dynamics. Specifically, the students will benefit from games in the following aspects:

- 1) *Affectively*: Games lower affective filter, encourage more creative and spontaneous use of language, improve communicative competence, increase motivation, and provide fun learning experience;
- 2) *Cognitively*: Games provide reinforcements and opportunities for review and extension tasks, and help the students focus on grammar communicatively;
- 3) *Class dynamics*: Games enhance student centeredness, teachers’ facilitator role, class cohesion, whole class participation, and healthy competition; and
- 4) *Adaptability*: Games provide easy adjustment for age, level, and interests, involve all four skills, and require minimum preparation after development.

Uberman (1998) also suggests that materials developers and language practitioners agree that games are not simply time-filling activities but tasks that have immense educational value.

Therefore, turning college students’ gloomy and impassive faces into bright ones when research paper writing stands as the lesson, is a challenge to every university writing teacher, especially those in an ESL context. One way to meet this challenge is to provide the learners with exciting and enjoyable writing tasks. Russel (2008) argues that fun writing tasks can help learners experiment with language in a “safe” way that is not subject to grading or evaluation. Randel, Morris, Wetzel, and Whitehill (1992) opine that the best results of using games are found to be in the areas of mathematics, physics, and language arts. This implies that cultivating students’ interest in research largely depends on the creativity of the teachers and the appeal of classroom activities. Teachers must be propelled to explore an array of more effective, more engaging and more exciting writing tasks that will further spur students’ interest in academic writing.

The Fun Tasks

To meet the aforementioned challenge, the present writer tried out the following “fun tasks” as motivational or enrichment writing activities. The everyday 90-minute lesson also included these “fun tasks” as springboard or supplementary exercises. The lessons covered key concepts like the different considerations in writing academic texts, the language of academic writing, and the writing process itself. Certainly, all these lessons aimed to further hone the students’ writing skills so that they would find composing discipline-specific academic texts easy, rewarding, and enjoyable. After doing these “fun tasks”, the students found writing very exciting and not boring and they could be better sensitized to appreciate the significance of research paper writing in their respective disciplines and future careers.

Some of the fun activities to be discussed below include *Library Hunt*, *Solve that Gobbledygook*, *Nosebleed*, *Go APA Online*, *Survey Says* and *Preciseword Puzzle*. They are generally useful to lower the students’ affective filter and to elicit creative and ardent response to academic writing. A detailed description of these “fun tasks” and how they can be carried out in the classroom will be provided below.

Fun Task 1: Library Hunt

Lesson: Knowing One’s Library

Mechanics:

Library Hunt is an interesting way for the students to get familiar with the library. It is imperative that they know their library well since they will use it very often when they search for relevant information. It is an enticing and cooperative activity since the team members have to work as one and as fast as they can to finish the task by navigating the library and by ambush interviewing respondents. This task is anchored on the notion that gaming teaches competition strategies, cooperation and teamwork, and conflict resolution (Neubecker, 2003). In addition, students understand that their membership in a learning group means that they either succeed or fail together. The task also introduces the concept of writing working bibliography and the use of online library catalogues since the students will be looking for specific references and their corresponding publication details and logging on to the library database in searching for answers.

The students are given BINGO card worksheets with items asking for pertinent information about the library and instructed to answer all the questions to complete the BINGO card provided for. Sample numbered questions in the BINGO card worksheet

include: In what section of the library can you find the book *Gateways and Skyways towards Developmental Reading*? What is the name of the chief librarian? What is the call number of the book *Linguistics and Language Education in the Philippines and Beyond*? Who is the author of the book *Transformative Education: A Sourcebook for Basic Education*? and What time does the library open/close? The students are instructed to write their responses on the appropriate numbered boxes.

The students are divided into “research circles” with at least five members per group, and are given 20 minutes to accomplish the task. They are asked to proceed to the library to answer all the given questions as fast as they can. The first group to finish receives extra points. The students’ answers are checked and a discussion of the key concepts about the library, for example, features and services of their own library. The students are also directed to visit *Learning to Learn* website at <http://www.tv411.org/lessons/cfm/learning.cfm?str=learning&num=7&act=1> for online library instructions.

B	I	N	G	O
Q1 _____	Q2 _____	Q3 _____	Q4 _____	Q5 _____
Q6 _____	Q7 _____	Q8 _____	Q9 _____	Q10 _____
Q11 _____	Q12 _____	Q13 _____	Q14 _____	Q15 _____
Q16 _____	Q17 _____	Q18 _____	Q19 _____	Q20 _____

Fun Task 2: Solve that Gobbledygook!

Lesson: Conciseness/Brevity

Gobbledygook is defined as incomprehensible, unclear, wordy or pompous jargon of specialists. *Solve that Gobbledygook* is an exciting way to teach the concept of conciseness and brevity reckoned to be an important writing skill. It is an effective exercise students may engage in to condense long passages and statements using their own words. They also use both their linguistic knowledge and schema to unlock the message behind the gobbledygook.

Mechanics:

The students work in pairs and are directed to state the given gobbledygook in brief. Observing brevity and conciseness in academic writing are then discussed and students are asked to critique and revise sample texts that use kilometeric and convoluted sentences. They are instructed to reduce the statements such as those found below into fewer words without sacrificing their meaning.

1. It is requested that any employee departing this storage room ascertain that all illumination is extinguished.
2. The mechanical apparatus of this vending facility is temporarily dysfunctional.
3. The proprietor of this business establishment is at present elsewhere, enjoying a midday meal.
4. The store at which you have arrived is not conducting business today.
5. It is strictly forbidden that any visitor in this retail store lift or manipulate the items on display.
6. The surface of this wall is at present covered with a newly applied coloring matter not at the desired stage of dryness.
7. When subjected to precipitation, the surface of this street becomes difficult to navigate.
8. Nearby is a person in work clothes attempting to get a job done.
9. Along this side of the street, motorists are not permitted to leave their vehicles in a stationary position.
10. It is not judicious to evaluate the contents of a volume or the character of a human being by outward appearances alone.

Fun Task 3: “Nosebleed”

Lesson: Paraphrasing

Nosebleed in the Philippines is an expression which means indigestible or hard-to-understand English words and utterances. This task introduces the students to the concept of paraphrasing which is required when they integrate authorities’ viewpoints into their own

writing. The exercise likewise teaches the students to write not to impress but to express ideas by dissuading them from using high-sounding words.

Mechanics:

The students are instructed to work in dyads and rephrase the given sentences that use very difficult and unfamiliar words. Using simpler terms, they restate the original sentences without changing their intended meaning. Some examples of these sentences are found below. Paraphrasing conventions are discussed afterwards and the students are given more quoted statements or passages to rewrite in their own words. For additional paraphrasing exercises, the students are instructed to log on to <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/619/01/>.

1. Scintillate scintillate asteroid minim.
2. Members of avian species of identical plumage congregate.
3. Surveillance should precede satiation.
4. It is fruitless to become lachrymose over precipitately departed lactate fluid.
5. The stylus is more potent than the claymore.
6. It is fruitless to attempt to indoctrinate a superannuated canine with innovative manners.
7. All articles that coruscate with resplendence are not truly auriferous.
8. Whenever there are visible vapors having their provenience ignited carbonaceous materials, there is conflagration.
9. Sorting on the parts of mendicants must be interdicted.
10. The person presenting the ultimate cachinnation possesses thereby the optimal cachinnation.

Source: http://www.geocities.com/ranjeet_singh/jokes56.html

Fun Task 4: Survey Says

Lesson: Conducting Surveys

Survey Says teaches the students the concept of conducting surveys. This activity provides students initial experience of gathering pertinent data. At the start, the survey questions sound intriguing, comical and humorous to make the process more fun and engaging. The students

are required to present the survey results and make some interpretations out of them. Through this exercise, the students are also introduced to simple data analysis.

Mechanics:

The students work in dyads. They are given 20 minutes to conduct a survey to 20 respondents outside the classroom. Sample intriguing and thrilling survey questions asked include “*Have you ever courted a girl/boy?*” “*Do you daydream?*” “*Do you believe that love is blind?*” “*Which do you prefer – long or short courtship?*” “*What is the most attractive part of your body?*” “*What is the right age to get married?*”

The students are also given the chance to formulate additional questions they would like to ask. They tally the results of the survey, do simple computations of percentages and provide interpretations of the results. They are also asked to compare their findings. The proper way of conducting surveys and developing questionnaires are discussed afterwards. They critique the survey questions and sample questionnaires provided by the teacher and derive conventions on phrasing data gathering instruments. They are also directed to log on to <http://www.statpac.com/surveys/> for more information about survey and questionnaire design.

Fun Task 5: Go APA Online

Lesson: APA Documentation

Go APA Online is an interesting web-based activity that allows students to use online learning resources. This is a self-instructional material that details the latest guidelines for citing all the different kinds of sources and teaches the students how to document references and write in-text citations using the APA style. This task makes students realize that any piece of information lifted from different sources must be properly documented; that is, credit must be given to writers from whom they are borrowed.

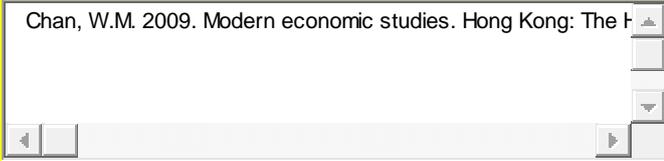
Mechanics:

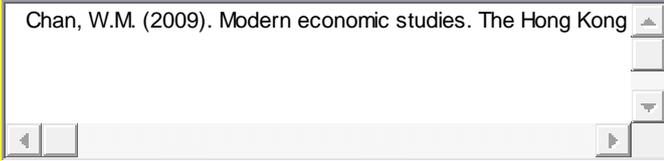
The students are instructed to log on to a prescribed website, for example, <http://elc.polyu.edu.hk/CILL/> for the Center of Independent Language Learning (CILL). They individually and independently answer the online exercises on APA documentation. They are required to submit the printed versions of their answers. The APA style in documenting sources is discussed and the students are given sample bibliographic entries and

in-text citations for analysis. They are then asked to accomplish exercises like arranging and formatting bibliographic details and in-text citations following the APA style. For additional information, the students are directed to log on to <http://www.apastyle.org/> for a self-instructional online resource about APA documentation.

Sample Online Exercise from CILL

Instructions: The following bibliographical references have mistakes. Correct them and then check your *answers* below. Ignore the lack of italics for the title.

1. 

2. 

Fun Task 6: Preciseword Puzzle

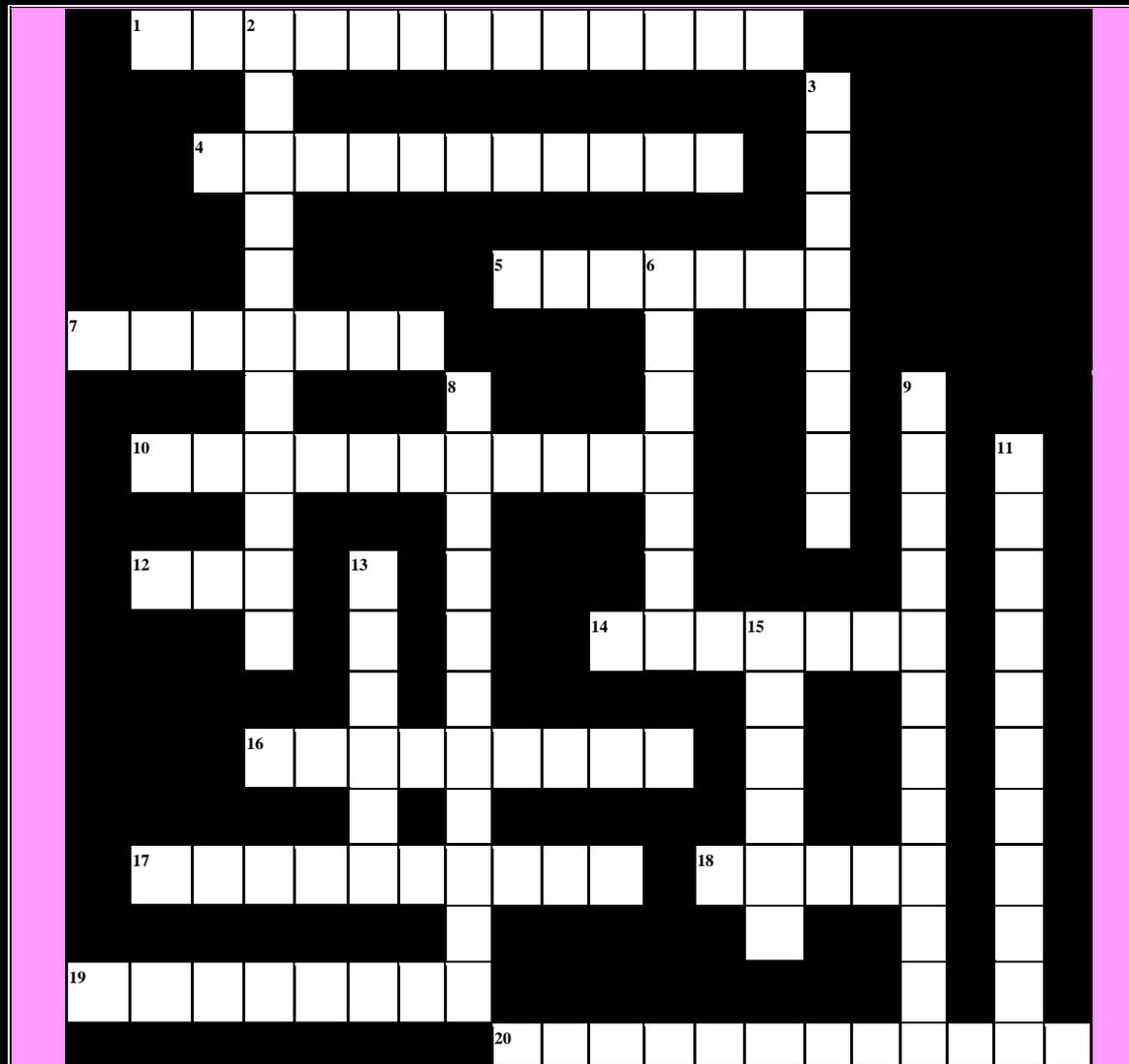
Lesson: Formality in Writing (Use of Precise Words)

Preciseword Puzzle is a motivating way to teach the use of formal and precise language used in academic writing. This enhances and expands the breadth of students' vocabulary when they think of the corresponding one-word verbs and equivalent formal words for the given informal expressions, idioms or prepositional phrases.

The use of puzzles has been proven to be effective in improving students' logical thinking. In this case, they not only advance their logical thinking but also widen their academic vocabulary. It is believed (International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English, 2008) that puzzles can be used in the classroom to support, extend, and enrich literacy-based instructional goals. They help students to further hone their word analysis and critical thinking skills and advance vocabulary and comprehension as well. Further, puzzles also offer opportunities for students to evaluate, analyze, synthesize, and summarize information and experiment with language.

Mechanics:

The students are asked to individually answer a crossword puzzle like the one shown below by thinking of one-word substitutes to the given idioms, informal words and phrases. They check their own answers afterwards and the use of formal words or academic lingo is discussed. The lesson may focus on avoiding contractions, colloquial and slang expressions, phrasal verbs, and imprecise language when writing academic papers. Additional exercises that ask students to rephrase non-academic expressions and structures are also provided. More crosswords puzzles are provided which could be easily created at <http://www.edhelper.com/crossword.htm>



Across:

- 1. not very good
- 4. important
- 5. get better
- 7. gather

Down:

- 2. encourages new ideas
- 3. large
- 6. get something
- 8. share information

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| 10. get worse | 9. causing disagreement or discussion |
| 12. achieve first position | 11. not certain |
| 14. to get back something | 13. not junior. older |
| 16. to remove or take away | 15. get something |
| 17. not expensive | |
| 18. not major | |
| 19. to make someone believe or do something | |
| 20. can not be approved | |

As an illustration of how the abovementioned “fun tasks” can be used in the class, a sample lesson plan is presented below. It can be carried out in 90 minutes and may be modified depending on the class size and other factors deemed significant by the teacher. The lesson plan uses one of the fun tasks above, *Preciseword Puzzle*, which would make the writing lesson more engaging and fun. As mentioned in the previous section, *Preciseword Puzzle* is a motivating way to teach the use of formal and precise language used in academic writing.

Sample Lesson Plan

I. Targets:

At the end of the period, the students should be able to:

1. discuss how formality, impartiality, and objectivity can be achieved in writing academic texts
2. use formal and precise words in writing academic texts and
3. rewrite statements to make them sound formal and academic

II. Lesson:

Formality in Academic Writing; Use of One-word Verbs and Precise Language
Materials: *Preciseword Puzzle* Workheet, Thinking Map, Sheets of Paper

III. Lesson Proper:

- A. **Presentation (5 minutes):** Present these two passages to the class. Have them individually read and analyze the two passages about the same topic. Lead them to point out that one uses formal language while the other uses informal language. Let the students deduce that formality is observed in writing academic texts.

Example 1:

Two NSW detectives latched onto a nice little earner in Manly where, the Police Integrity Commission heard, the enterprising pair managed to filch more than \$120,000 from drug dealers in just two months (Sydney Morning Herald, 13/10/01, p 50).

Example 2:

It was alleged at the Police Integrity Commission that two Manly detectives extorted more than \$120,000 from drug dealers over a two month period.

- B. **Group Task (10 minutes):** Divide the class into smaller groups. Each group must have at least four members. Provide them with copies of the *Mind Map* downloadable from *graphic.org*. For 10 minutes, have the students fill out the map by listing down their thoughts on how to make their writing more formal, less impartial, and more objective. This will be a good way to activate students' schema on the focus topic. Ask each group to choose a leader who will share the results of their brainstorming.
- C. **Output Presentation (20 minutes):** Let the leaders present to the whole class what they brainstormed on without repeating what the other groups have mentioned. Have the leaders cite specific ways to make one's writing formal, impersonal, and impartial. Correct students' misconceptions if there are any.
- D. **Input (20 minutes):** Provide additional input on formality conventions which can be retrieved from <http://www.word-mart.com/html/formalandinformalwriting.html> Show more illustrative examples to students to make them familiar with the language of academic writing. (Note: More examples and input for the other formality conventions may be provided in the following meeting).
- E. **Writing Task (20 minutes):** Direct the students' attention to one formality convention – the use of one-word verbs and precise language. Provide each student a copy of the *Preciseword Puzzle*. Give them 10 minutes to individually complete the puzzle. Discuss and check students' answers.
- F. **Evaluation (10 minutes):** Present the following statements to the students. Ask them to choose three. Instruct them to rewrite their chosen sentences by changing some parts to formal language.
- a. *To take a look at the problem of declining numbers of visitors to Manila, we settle on doing a really big survey.*
 - b. *We made a questionnaire and handed it out to 500 people.*
 - c. *We did this because as of now we don't have any hard data on why tourist numbers are on the way out.*
 - d. *There's not much information available either on what might bring them back to Manila.*
 - e. *The return rate for the questionnaire was really bad at only 13% but this figure should provide a firm enough basis for talking about why tourist numbers are going down.*
- G. **Reflection (5 minutes):** Ask the students to write on their English diary what they have learned from the day's lesson. Ask volunteer students to share their insights if there is still time.

IV. **Assignment:**

Ask the students to clip two journal articles to be analyzed in the following meeting. These articles will be used in discussing the other formality conventions.

Conclusion

Research paper writing remains a difficult course and teachers should exert their level best to make it easier for the students. It should be realized that its teaching is something that can be diversified and have fun conducting by coming up with unordinary and more enticing

classroom-based writing tasks. The use of the “fun tasks” cited above, for instance, could make the writing class “cool” and pleasurable for as the students undergo the rigors of research paper writing, they also enjoy the process at the same time. The use of these games and other fun activities has been proven to be a potent pedagogical tool for they are dynamic, intrinsically motivating, and engage high levels of involvement. They also provide immediate feedback to participants, and mistakes do not result in actually losing assets (Hood, 1997).

Since there is a large collection of e-learning tools relevant to English language teaching and learning on the World-Wide Web and activities provided by up-to-date print sources, teachers have the means to facilitate enjoyable classroom learning. Teachers’ creativity plays a crucial role in coming up with well thought-out motivational or pre-instruction writing tasks that serve as springboards for the discussion of target academic writing concepts. They just have to seek the right approach and strategy to ensure that students, while they take pleasure in the process, produce quality research papers that are of scientific and practical value. However, it must be remembered that it is crucial that suitable tasks be chosen whenever they are to be conducted and that the beneficial effects of gaming be most likely to be found when specific content is targeted and objectives precisely defined (Randel et al., 1992).

Indeed, research writing is one macroskill that is complicated to learn and to cultivate. Many students may regard it as painstaking and dull. However, teachers have the power to create an enjoyable writing environment where students will learn how to value the art of composition and enjoy the learning of the fine points of the writing process at the same time. Let us always keep in mind that a difficult and mind-numbing course may not be taught the difficult and boring way.

References:

- Abelos, A., Basbas, R., Gamboa, S., Alfonso, R., & Ligawen, S. (2008). *Essentials of writing in the discipline*. Valenzuela City: Mutya Publishing House, Inc.
- Hood, P. (1997). *Simulation as a tool in education research and development*. The USA: EdTalk.
- International Reading Association/National Council of Teachers of English (2008). *Creating puzzles: A guide for teachers*. Retrieved February 6, 2010, from <http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/crossword/create/forteachers.html>

- Lengeling, M., & Malarcher, C. (1997). Index cards: A natural resource for teachers. *Forum*, 35(4), 156-163.
- Millions, D. (2008). *Common challenges with research papers*. Retrieved September 7, 2009, from <http://www.articlesbase.com>.
- Neubecker, M. (2003). Simulation as an instructional tool. Encyclopedia of Educational Technology. San Diego, CA: San Diego State University. Online: <http://coe.sdsu.edu/eet/articles/simulations/index>.
- Randel, J. M., Morris B. A., Wetzel, C. D., & Whitehill, B. V. (1992). The effectiveness of games for educational purposes: A review of recent research. *Simulation and Gaming*, 23(3), 261-276.
- Russel, L. (2008). *Writing prompts, games, journals: Creative writing activities and habits get students to love writing*. Retrieved February 6, 2010, from http://homeschooling.suite101.com/article.cfm/creative_writing_activities#ixzz0pIgeUce.
- Uberman, A. (1998). The use of games for vocabulary presentation and revision. *Forum*, 36(1), 95-106.
-

About the Author



Alejandro S. Bernardo has been teaching English for nine years. He handles courses like academic writing, developmental reading, introduction to college English and oral communication in context. At present, he is a member of the Faculty of Arts and Letters of the University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines. He is finishing his Ph.D. in English Language Studies at the same university. He has presented papers in national and international conferences and published articles in reputable journals. His research interests include contentious issues in language instruction, vocabulary acquisition, Philippine English, and developmental reading.