



# Promoting Creative Thinking in Higher Education Classrooms through Engaging Task Design

German Association of Sprachpraxis Professionals

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eltonix**

**With special thanks to British Council**



## In this session, we'll



understand the difference between activities and meaningful tasks



explore the importance of creative thinking in a changing world



apply the three elements of creativity to our task design



Look at the following materials that we may typically use in our English language courses.

**H** Write the verb in brackets in the correct form, present perfect simple or present perfect continuous. Use contractions where possible.

- 1 ..... (I / **send off**) over 18 press releases this morning so far.
- 2 Is it the first time ..... (you / **ever** / **eat**) squid?
- 3 ..... (we / **wait**) for you for the past two hours. Where ..... (you / **be**)?
- 4 ..... (you / **just** / **receive**) an e-mail from Ruth?
- 5 I'm afraid ..... (we / **get**) any milk. .... (we / **expect**) a delivery for the past four hours but ..... (they / **show up**) yet.
- 6 ..... (I / **draw up**) a list of people to invite to the wedding but ..... (I / **get**) very far so far. .... (you / **have**) any thoughts about it?
- 7 Oh, Clair, my ..... (mum / **mean**) to ask you for a while. Would you like to come with us to Wimbledon?

- What is the activity practising?
- How does it help our students?
- Is it engaging?



**B.** Look at the book covers on page 61 and answer the questions. Then discuss your ideas with a partner.

1. What do you think the two stories are about?

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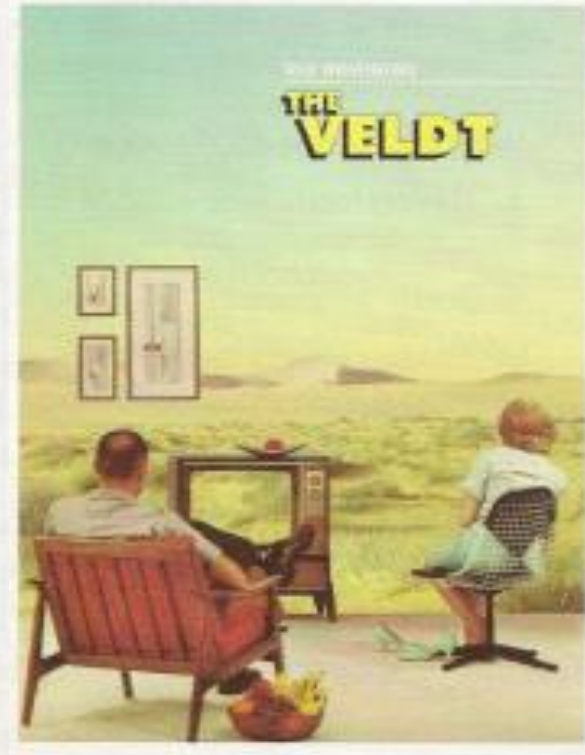
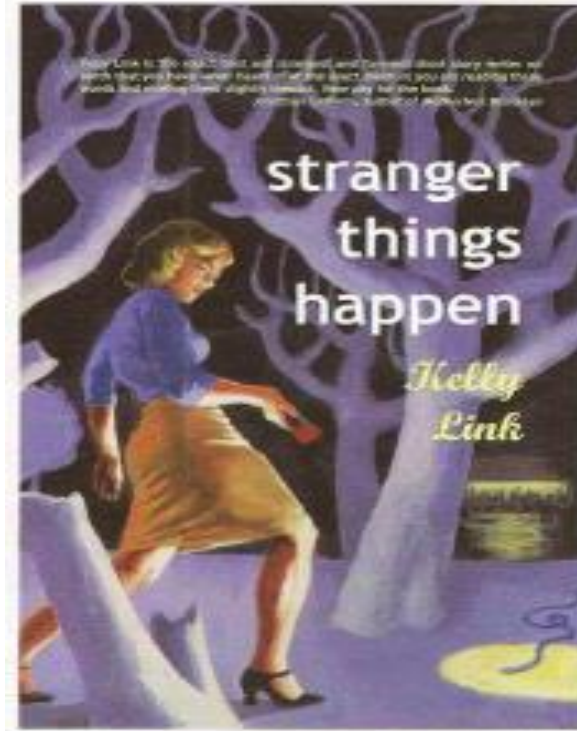
2. What might the two stories have in common?

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3. Have you ever read anything like these stories?

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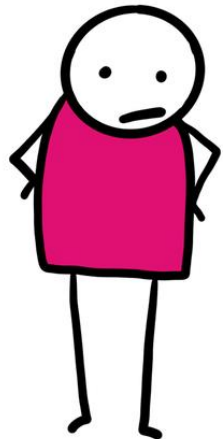


- What is the activity practising?
- How does it help our students?
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From 21<sup>st</sup> Century Reading 4 (National Geographic).



Meet Anna. She just left her university in Germany and is now working for a sustainable engineering company. She can manage some daily tasks well but has now been asked to be the primary liaison with a Greek company.



I have no idea what anyone is saying on these business calls. They speak quickly and with an accent. I don't speak up because I'm afraid of making mistakes.

What is the problem?

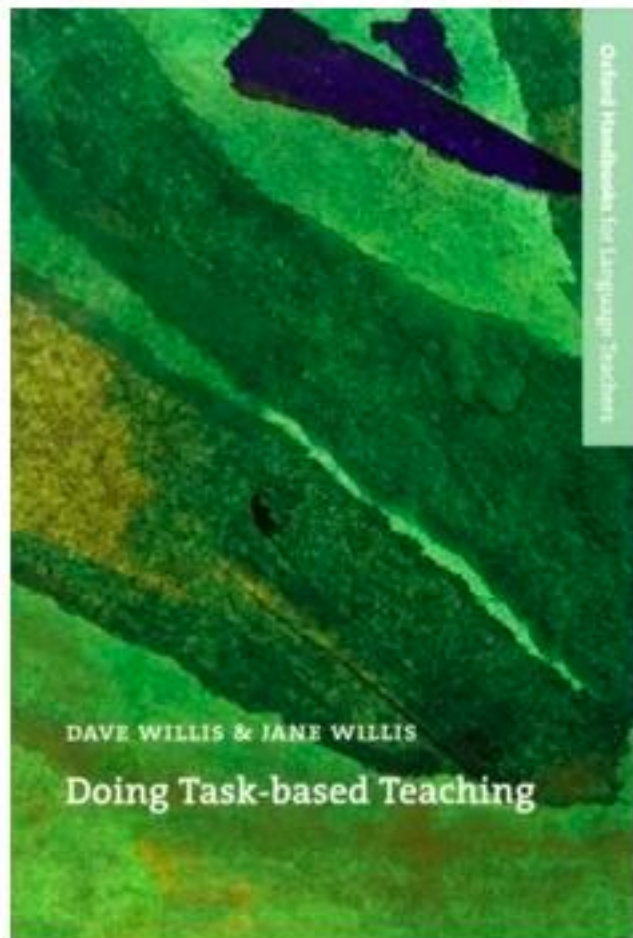
What could have caused it?

Is this a common experience?





## What is a task?



First published: 2007  
**Jane & David Willis**

"Many traditional methodologies begin by teaching grammatical forms and then go on to use those forms. The initial aim of TBT is to encourage learners to **engage in meaning** with the language resources they already have. This makes learners acutely aware of what they need to learn. They are then given **form-focussed activities** to help them develop that language".  
(p.10)



# Meaning versus form





# Meaning versus form

## Choice 1

The learners will focus on **form** to try and produce the correct grammar they've just learnt. Therefore, they won't be able to focus on real-life, spontaneous communication. If this happens, they are getting practice in making sentences.

For the teacher, the activity has failed to be meaning-driven and communicative.

## Choice 2

The learners will focus on **meaning** and ignore the fact that they're trying to focus on the target language of the lesson.

For the teacher, the activity has failed in the sense that the students haven't incorporated the correct form in their spontaneous speaking.





## Meaning-focused task criteria



- Is it engaging?
- Is the focus on meaning rather than form?
- Is the focus on task completion?
- Does it have real life application?



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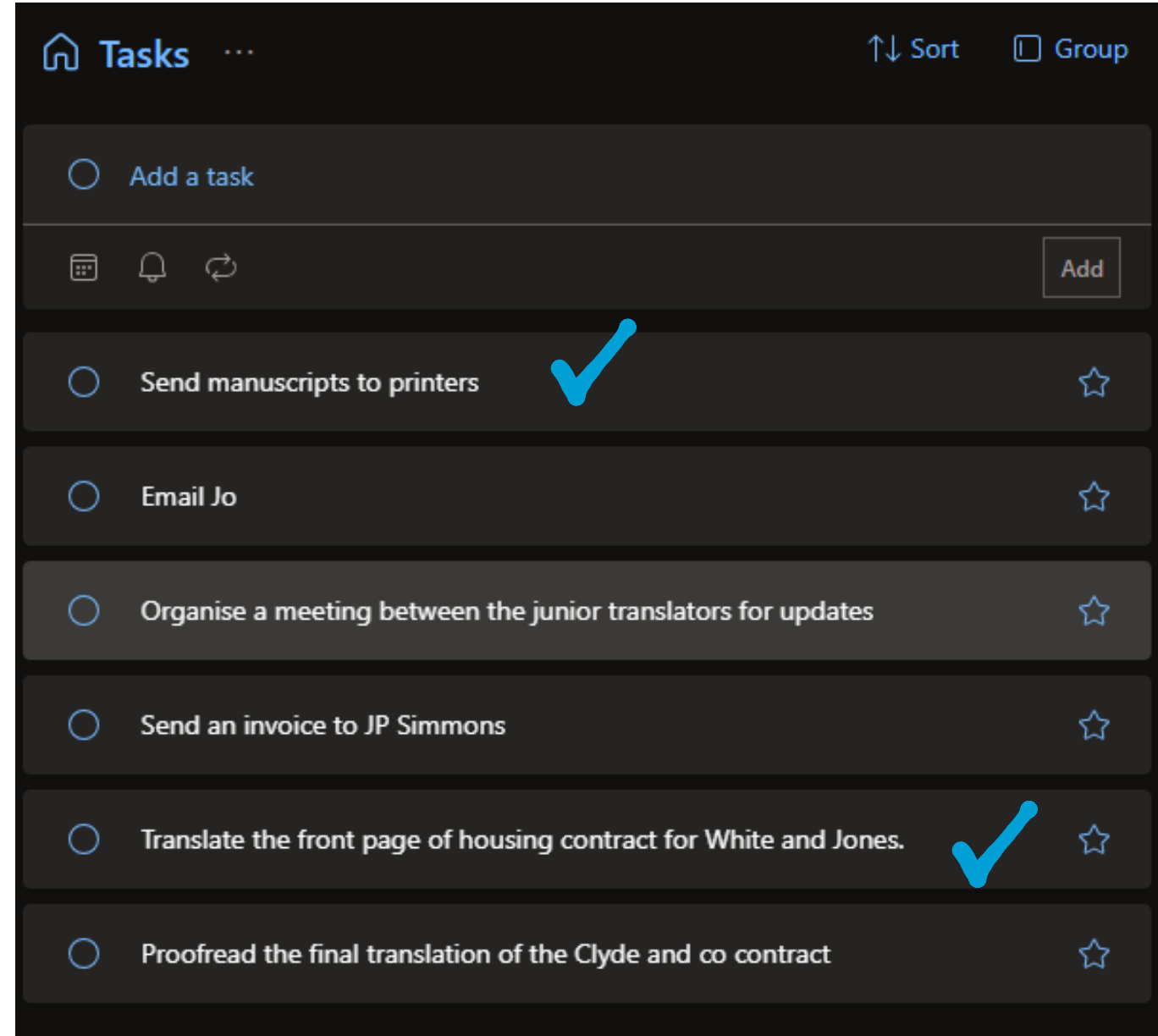


## Activity to task

1. You work at a translation company and your boss is very demanding and a little rude. Your boss wants to know how you are getting along with your task list.

2. Tell your boss which tasks are complete (there are only two) and which are incomplete giving reasons/excuses why.

3. Your boss will ask you some extra questions.





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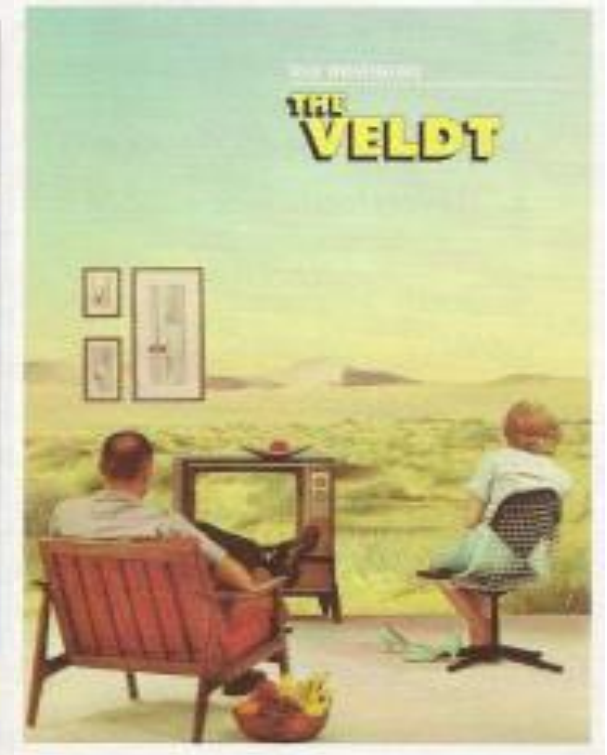
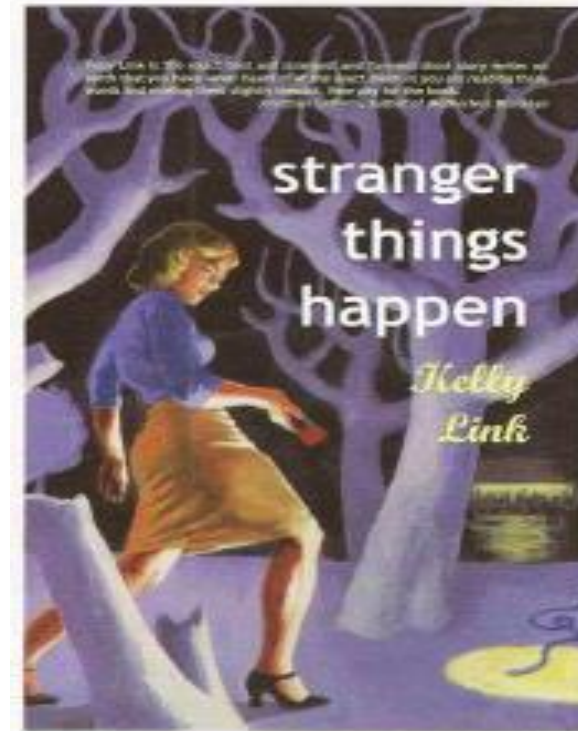
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3. Have you ever read anything like these stories?

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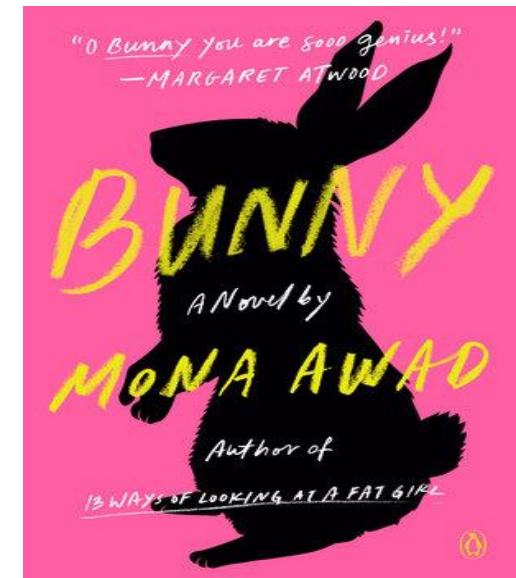
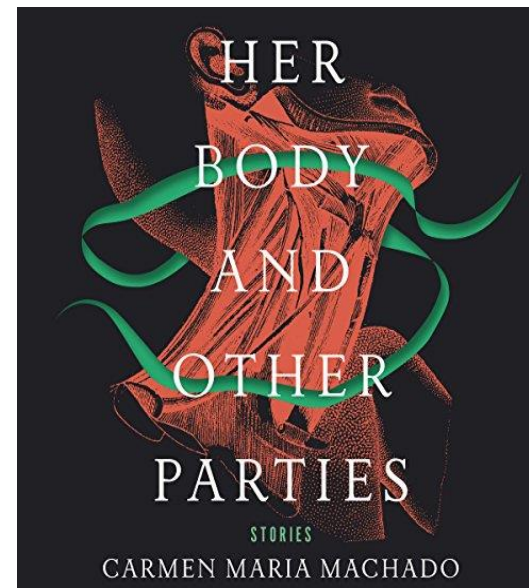
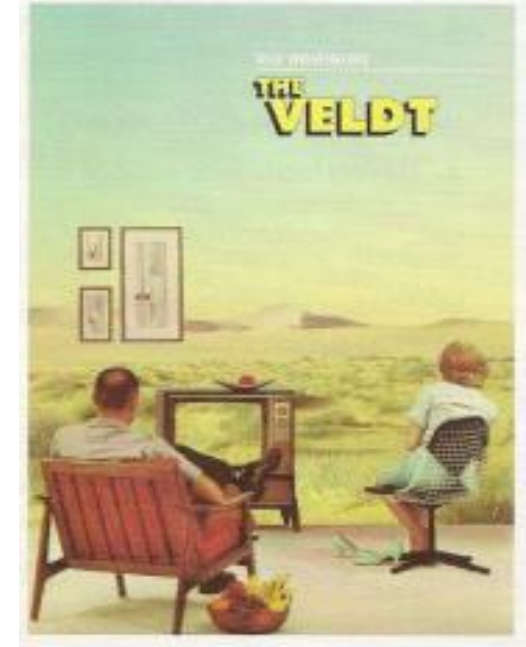
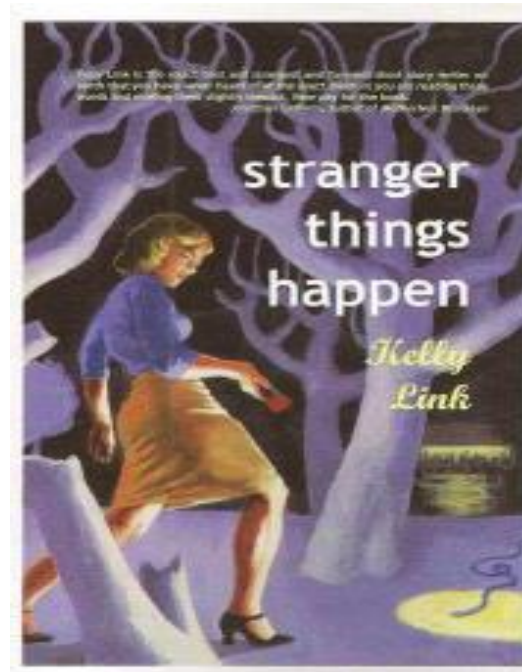


## From activity to task

You have joined an English book club to improve your English language skills. You have been asked to propose 2 books to read this semester.

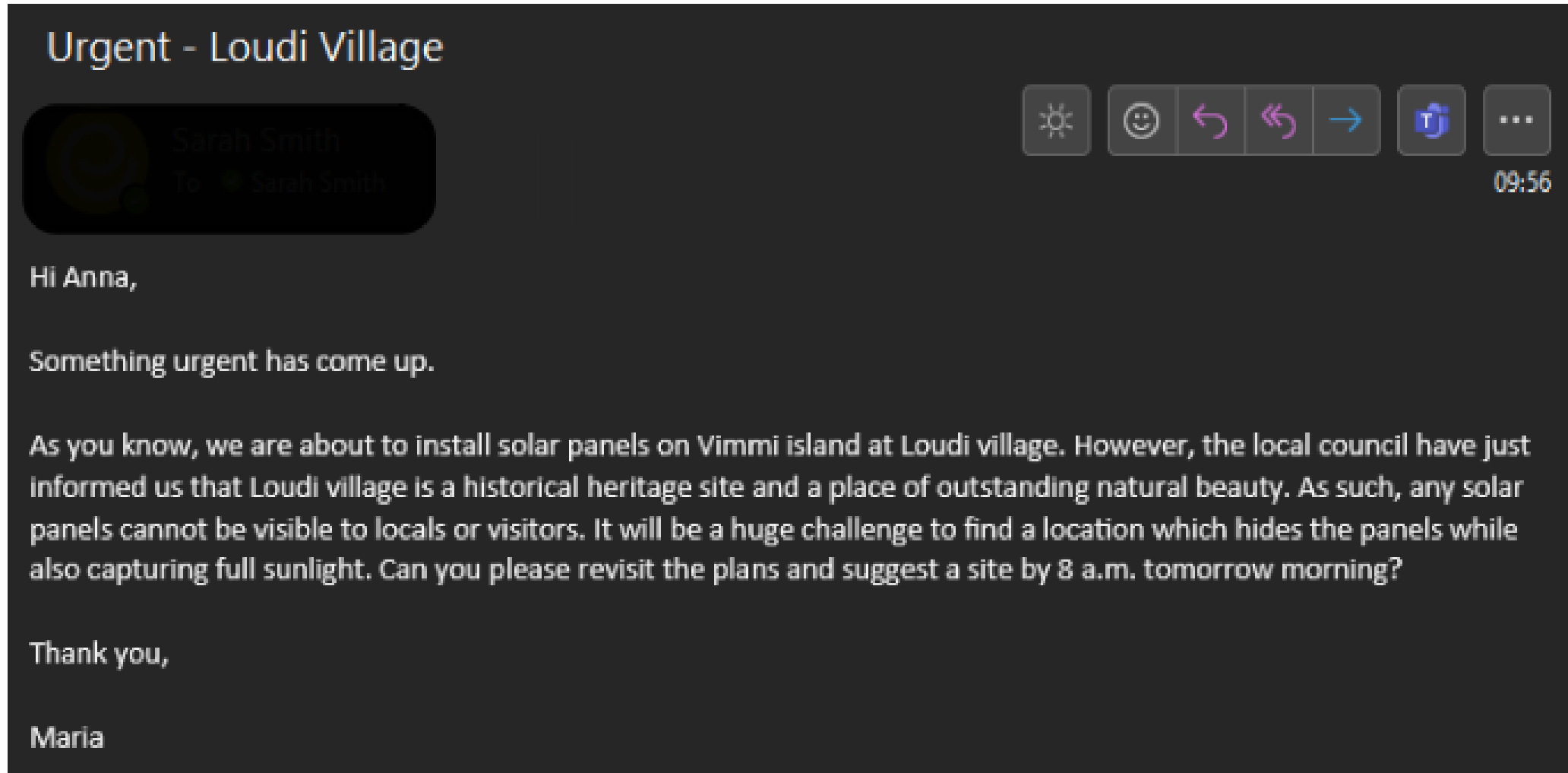
Choose 2 out of the 4 books that you think your club should read and think of at least 3 reasons why.

Discuss your ideas with your group and come up with a final booklist of 3 books.





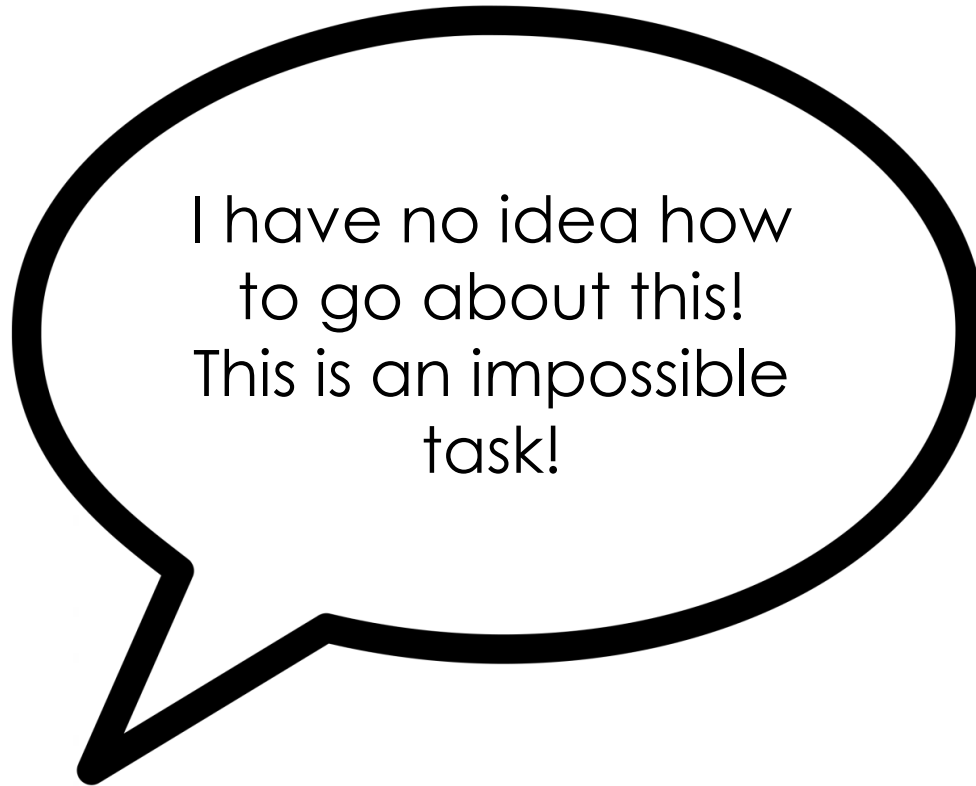
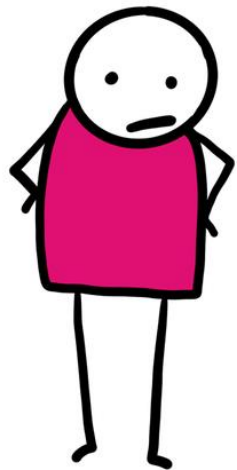
Anna feels much more confident speaking and interacting with others using English as a Lingua Franca. But now her boss asks her to find a quick solution to this problem:







Anna says:



What is the problem?

What could have caused it?

Is this a common experience?



## What kind of world are we preparing our students for?

We have long shifted from an industrial society to a knowledge society where the importance of creativity has become more widely recognised for generating **new and appropriate coping measures** (Hammershøj, 2006)

Our world is '**supercomplex**' rather than complex. (Brockling, 2006: 513)

**A complex world** – we are inundated by more facts, data evidence, tasks and arguments than we can easily handle within existing social frameworks.

**A supercomplex world** - the very frameworks by which we orient ourselves to the world are contested (Barnett, 2007: 257).

We **need creative thinking to tackle global problems** including world poverty and global environmental issues.



What kind of world are we preparing our students for?

The 2020 Future of Jobs Survey (World Economic Forum) asked senior executives from organisations around the world **what skills were increasingly important for their workforce.**

creativity  
originality  
initiative

The **pace of cultural change** is accelerating more quickly than ever before, and there is a **global demand** for creativity to survive such rapid changes.

Dr. Liane Gabora, University of British Columbia.



Improved creative capacity generates better wellbeing, happiness and self-identity



Increased global competition, and the growth of the information society and new technologies, has resulted in the emergence of new forms of work and the demand for new kind of workers.

## **Why should we teach creativity?**



Creativity can reach all students not just those with good memorisation skills or who are more 'academic.'



It is multi-disciplinary, can be and should be taught!



## Key reflection questions

Do we give students freedom enough to play?

Are we, as educators, enthusiastic and playful about our subjects?

How do we encourage students to combine creative thinking with critical thinking, brainstorming with judgements and exploration with discipline in ways that will enhance their creativity?

How do we stimulate students to articulate the questions they want to explore rather than simply transmitting knowledge to them?

And importantly do we actually know what creativity is?



## What is creativity?

*"The essence of creativity is to **look at the world around us**, see how it is and **imagine other possibilities** that are not immediately present or based on our immediate personal experience. **Creativity is seeing the possibilities** and then **trying to make those imaginings into material reality.**"*

**Agustín Fuentes - Anthropologist**





“People pigeonhole creativity as belonging to a single individual or group of geniuses. They don’t realize that each and **every human has this incredible capacity to imagine and to change things.** Auto mechanics can be amazingly creative – so can people trying to stretch a paycheck to the end of the month.” A.Fuentes





## What do creative thinking skills look like?

- Looking for **many possible answers**
- Allowing yourself to make **wild and crazy suggestions**
- **Not judging ideas** early in the process
- Allowing yourself to **daydream, doodle, or play**
- Making lots of **suggestions that are unworkable and silly.**
- Making **mistakes.**
- Learning from **what didn't work**



## When does creativity blossom?



**'The challenge of balancing various constraints in a constructive manner'**  
(Biskjar & Hlskov, 2001)



**'The more constrained the solution paths, the more variable, the more creative the problem solvers.'** (Stokes, 2006)



**'Constraints usually make me think in a different way than I would maybe naturally think and they make the process a little more enjoyable and the final output is something I'm usually more proud of.'**  
(Damian Correll, interview, 2008).



# When does creativity blossom?



Process



Product

a structured **process** that should be **taught to students of all ages** in order to adequately prepare them for the future.

# How do we help develop creative thinkers?



apply certain **constraints** within tasks



encourage students to **observe**



foster a sense of **wonder** and  
encourage **curiosity**



# Apply **Content** and/or **Structural Constraints**

**Provide prompts for students to work from**

**Provide questions for students to answer**

**Provide inspiration for students to write about or respond to**

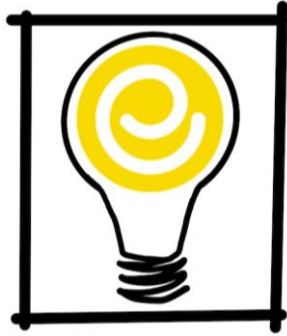
**Include a problem-solving element**

**How many words to use in a sentence**

**Syllable counting**







**apply content constraints in tasks**

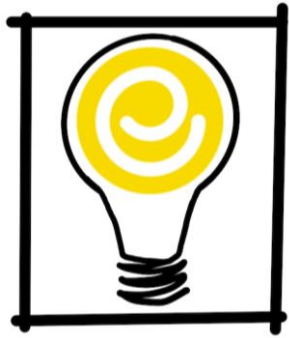
**Write an email to a company to complain about a faulty product. Write in a formal style.**

**Think of a product, problem, consequence and action requested.**

**1st paragraph - product and problem**

**2nd paragraph - consequence**

**3rd paragraph - action requested**



apply certain constraints

PRODUCT:



Justin Bieber  
CD

PRODUCT:



Balloon

PRODUCT:



Tube of  
Lipstick

PRODUCT:



Star Wars  
Action Figure

PRODUCT:



Watch

PRODUCT:



Microwave

PRODUCT



apply certain constraints

Problem:

1  
Is too  
big

Problem:

2  
Really  
Itchy

Problem:

3  
Has a  
hole in  
it

Problem:

4  
It's  
stuck

Problem:

5  
Makes  
too much  
noise






Problem:

6  
Wrong  
Size

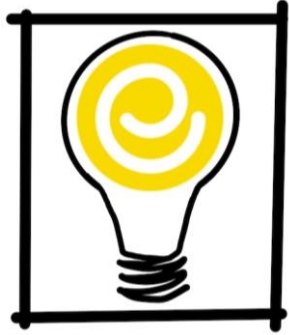
PROBLEM



apply certain constraints

CONSEQUENCE:	CONSEQUENCE:	CONSEQUENCE:	CONSEQUENCE:	CONSEQUENCE:
 1	 2	 3	 4	 5
I lost a lot of money	I failed a class	My boyfriend/ girlfriend broke up with me	My whole house smells	I went to jail

CONSEQUENCE



## apply certain constraints

Action Requested:	Action Requested:	Action Requested:	Action Requested:	Action Requested:
Exchange 1 for a new one	Want a 2 written apology	Give me 3 a discount on future purchases	Want a 4 refund	Send me 5 \$1,000 compensation

ACTION REQUESTED

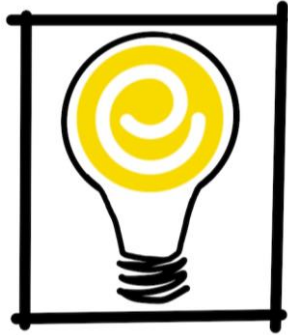


## **My task**

I've bought a Star Wars action figure and it makes too much noise which results in my whole house smelling. I have to write an email to ask for a written apology.



# How do we help develop creative thinkers?



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## Opportunities for creative thinking tasks

### 6 ways to wait at a bus stop!

- You have no phone & no technology
- You're really bored
- You're alone
- In pairs, write 6 things you can do while waiting for the bus!



Count white cars only

Make origami birds from your bus ticket

Bite nails into the shape of celebrities

Impersonate every pigeon that goes by

Make a song from tapping your feet on the pavement

Dance to the sound of passing cars



There's only 1 space on the bus! Who's getting on?



- Students individually choose one way to wait for a bus from their 6 ideas, then they decide how long they've been waiting for the bus (they keep these secret)
- Group the sts in groups of 4 or 5 and they stand in the bus queue
- Tell them the bus has come along and this is what the bus driver says
- They have to talk to each other and persuade each other why they should be the person who gets on the bus
- To do this, they:
  1. act out their idea & include it in their reason,
  2. say how long **they've been waiting**
  3. and **why they should get on the bus.**



## Students said:

I've been waiting here for 45 minutes, and I've just had some dentistry work. I really need to go home and sleep!



I was waiting here for 30 minutes, and I think I was here before you.

I been waiting here for a long time, and I will be late if I don't get this one!

I've given up my spot on the last two buses. Please let me get on. I've got finals coming up and need to get home and study.





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## Reversal thinking

### **Discussion questions from a C1 Conversation Class on the first day of term:**

How do you like to learn?

What's the best way to learn vocabulary?

How can we make homework more enjoyable?

The trick here is to encourage deeper thinking rather than just making a negative into a positive or vice versa...and really think of a solution.



# Reversal thinking

How can we make homework more enjoyable?

**Loads of it!** **NOT** None of it!

**BUT** We work on a homework schedule as a whole class.

**Lots of writing/grammar** **NOT** Never any writing/grammar

**BUT** We get a choice - this can be given by the teacher or decided by the learner(s).



## Reversal thinking

Do ghosts believe in us?

How can we escalate an argument?

How can we make the negative impact on climate change worse?

How can we be slower at learning new words?

How can we meditate unsuccessfully?

What are the worst conditions for plants to grow?

Where are the worst places to put solar panels?



## A meaning-focused task

- Is it engaging?
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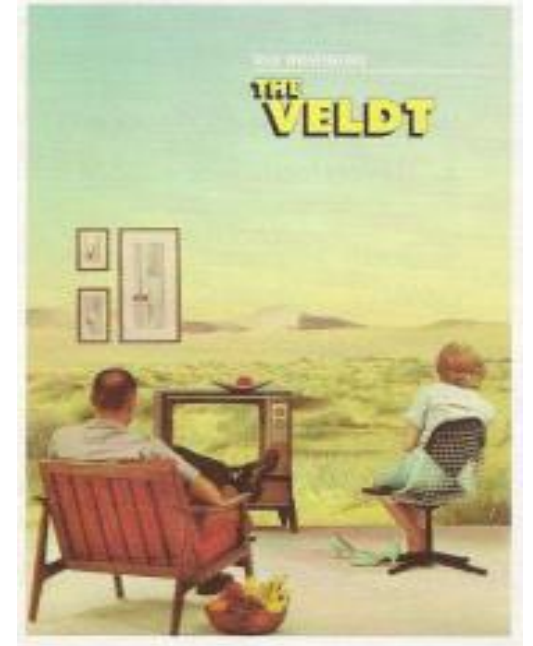
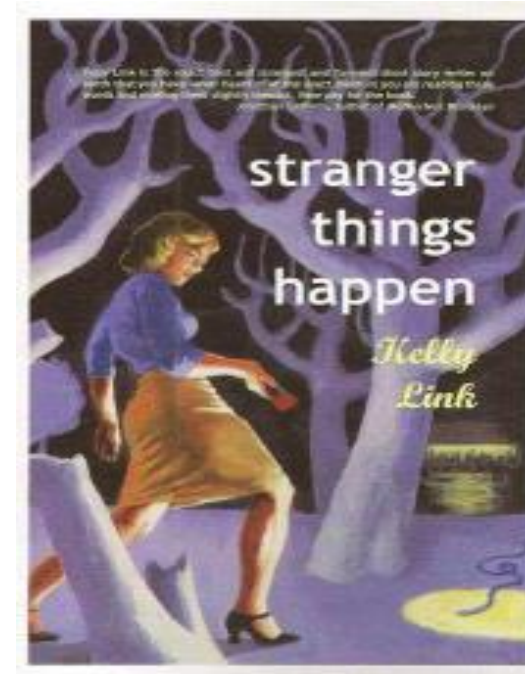
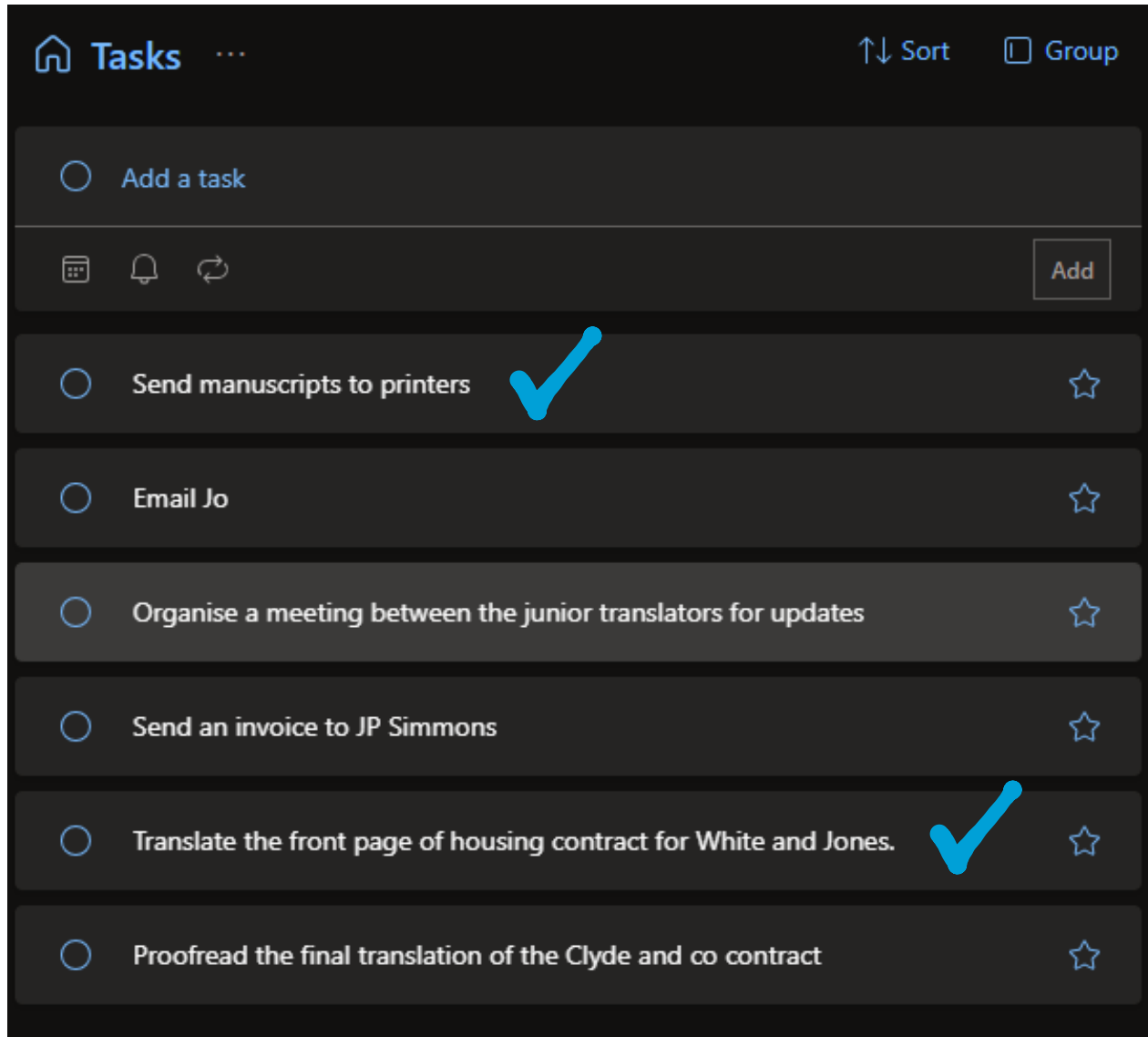


## A creative task

- Are the learners encouraged to closely observe?
- Do the learners have creative constraints (content/structural)?
- Is a sense of curiosity and wonder encouraged?



# We created a task...but not a creative one!



This is what we will be exploring in the workshop!



## In this session, we'll



understand the difference between activities and meaningful tasks



explore the importance of creative thinking in a changing world



apply the three hinges of creativity to our task design







# Some wonderfully creative resources...

TIME magazine – The Science of Creativity (Single Issue)

Karen Benke – Adventures in Creative Writing

Agustín Fuentes – The Creative Spark

Brandon Rodriguez – The Power of Creative Constraints (YouTube)

eltonix' Creativity Webinar Series - [What is creativity in the classroom? | TeachingEnglish | British Council](#)



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