

CREATIVITY IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: ESTABLISHING A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary research, creativity is no more attributed only to the gifted and exceptional individual who is born with special talent, and it is no more understood as a distinct personality trait or mental process possessed only by a few, but is rather defined as an activity generated by even common sense and everyday mental mechanisms that every person is able to carry out.

Carrying this belief in mind, the paper highlights that creativity can be and should be improved in education with great care. It investigates the most common and up-to-date classifications of creativity theories and examines the most recent outcomes of creativity research. It points at the importance of improving creativity, creative thinking and problem solving in education with special attention to the English as a foreign language classroom. It clarifies the characteristics of creative behaviour and tries to establish a theoretical framework that should be taken into consideration in higher education training. The responsibilities and potential of EFL teacher training programmes in providing help not only for teacher trainees but also for primary and secondary school teachers is emphasised and discussed in details.

KEYWORDS: English as a foreign language, English language teaching, creativity, problem solving, critical thinking

INTRODUCTION

Researchers who study creativity often emphasize the importance of individual characteristics such as personality, motivation, orientation and cognitive factors which influence the development of creativity. However, several recent theories of creativity (researchers such as Mihály Csíkszentmihályi and Rustin Wolfe [6]) have expanded previous models of creativity and have examined the influence of societal influences on the development of the individual's creativity. The social context, the educational environment, interaction with parents, teachers, mentors and peers, interpersonal relationships can become vital in the promotion of creativity and the development of creative behaviour.

Educational creativity and the role of schools in the development of the individual's creativity need to be re-examined so that learners can be equipped with up-to-date knowledge base and skills to face contemporary social changes and challenges. Critical thinking, problem-solving skills, good cooperation skills and the ability to innovate are crucial characteristics of creative individuals and primary and secondary schools need to be prepared to improve

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these qualities. However, teachers' creativity is not a given phenomenon, it needs to be developed and encouraged, since it is only creative and motivated teachers who can initiate and improve their learners' creativity.

A teacher of English as a foreign language must keep in mind that the transmission of language items, grammar structures or new vocabulary cannot be carried out in isolation, since learners will use the language in several different contexts for a variety of purposes. It needs to be accepted that in addition to the knowledge of the language, the social skills and creativity of learners should be improved as well. The concept of the social learner as well as theories of collaborative learning and the importance of creativity are becoming more and more central in foreign language teaching and should become one of the fundamental priorities of higher education training as well, since it is higher education programmes that can help EFL teachers in improving both their own and their learners' creativity and can provide them with sufficient and up-to-date forms of teaching.

1. Creativity Research

Creativity has been examined in connection with intelligence, memory and emotion and it has many times been discussed also in connection with talent, invention or individual genius. Psychologists and sociologists have come up with various definitions and it has even been debated whether creativity should be the object of scientific study. To understand the complexity and diversity of creativity research, it should be recognized that throughout the centuries the conceptions of creativity have changed. Creativity could be connected with the creative work of an artist, who produces some kind of beauty or innovative form, but at the same time it could also refer to the productive and innovative activities of scientists, learners, individuals and even groups. In contemporary research, however, creativity is no more attributed only to the gifted and exceptional individual who is born with special talent, and it is no more understood as a distinct personality trait or mental process possessed only by a few, but is rather defined as an activity generated by even common sense and everyday mental mechanisms that every person is able to carry out.

R. Keith Sawyer (2006) talks about the "science of creativity" [15: 4] and highlights that sociocultural approach to creativity, which was started in the 1980s by a group of psychologists, emphasises that the definition and the development of 'creativity science' requires the interdisciplinary interplay of the 'science of creativity' and other social sciences such as sociology, anthropology and history [15: 36]. Definitely, psychology, sociology, anthropology, history or cultural studies are all interested in the creative potential of the individual, but is it possible to imagine a complete independent field of study – the 'science of creativity' – without the tools of the above mentioned disciplines? It is difficult to imagine a separate scientific field called creativity – who would be its scientist, a 'creativist'? Creativity is rather a phenomenon, which represents an important part of other areas of study, which is examined by several other disciplines as well. On the other hand, linking creativity with sociology and several aspects of culture and history represents a great shift from the emphasis of the individual nature of creativity and personal creativity to the broader understanding of creativity and the emphasis of the social, cultural and historical aspects of creativity.

Initially, creativity was primarily associated with psychology, which was interested in the creative potential of individuals. However, many creative products are created by groups, in these cases group creativity can be examined together with group dynamics and cooperation. It is also highlighted how social factors influence creativity. Cultural historians investigate why certain societies in particular periods of history were more creative than others, for

example why the Renaissance flourished and developed in Florence, Italy, and what were the factors that contributed to a higher level of creativity in these regions that time compared to other parts of Europe. In order to understand this, several social, economic and political factors should be considered and their contribution to the development of creativity has to be treated as vital. Sawyer calls this phenomenon “societal creativity” [15: 32].

Theories of creativity have been centred on the following basic questions: What is creativity? Who can be creative? What are the characteristic features of creative behaviour? How can creativity be developed and increased?

The most common distinction between the two basic types of creativity is the Big C and the little C dichotomy, where Big C refers to eminent examples of creativity such as Shakespeare’s plays, Walt Whitman’s poetry or Beethoven’s symphonies, while small c refers to everyday manifestations of creativity in everyday life. This simple classification seems to be unsatisfactory when examining the forms of creativity and can even make the definition of creativity subjective and ambiguous.

Kozbelt, Beghetto and Runco (2010) classify creativity theories according to a variety of aspects. They claim that traditionally, the most common creativity theories were classified according to which aspect of creativity they referred to. These aspects – usually referred to as the “four P’s of creativity” – are *process*, *product*, *person* and *place*. They claim that more recent versions of this framework (e.g. Simonton 1990 and Runco 2003, 2007) have extended it to six P’s by adding *persuasion* and *potential* [11: 24]. Kozbelt et. al. elaborate ten categories of creativity theories [11: 25-40]:

1. Developmental – it holds that creativity develops over time and is mediated by an interaction of person and environment
2. Psychometric – it claims that creativity can be measured reliably and validly, it differentiates creativity from related constructs (IQ) and highlights its domain-specific nature
3. Economic – it holds that creative behaviour is influenced by “market forces” and cost-benefit analyses
4. Stage and Componential Process – creative expression proceeds through a series of stages or components
5. Cognitive – creativity depends on thought processes
6. Problem Solving and Expertise-Based – creative solutions to ill-defined problems result from a rational process, which relies on general cognitive processes and domain expertise
7. Problem Finding – it holds that creativity lies in finding, exploring and identifying problems to be solved
8. Evolutionary (Darwinian) – “eminent creativity results from the evolutionary-like processes of blind generation and selective retention” [11: 28]
9. Typological – it holds that there are individual differences between creators and these differences are related to both macro- and micro-level factors and can be classified via typologies
10. Systems – creativity results from a complex system of interacting and interrelated factors.

Mihály Csíkszentmihályi is one of the representatives of the tenth category listed by Kozbelt et. al., whose system of creativity and its importance in education will be discussed in more details later in section 2.

1.1. The characteristics of creative behaviour

The typical features of creative behaviour definitely depend on the definition of creativity itself and from which aspects creativity is examined. The ten categories of creativity theories mentioned in the previous section highlight different characteristics of creative behaviour; however, it is possible to conclude on the very peculiar distinguishing features that classify certain activities and behavioural practices as creative. By making judgments on activities and behaviour, we do not focus on the reasons and components of creativity, but rather on the processes and/or products or outcomes of creativity.

Anna Craft (2000) describes creativity as “a state of mind in which all our intelligences are working together, involving seeing, thinking and innovating” [4: 38]. Cremin and Barnes claim that “Creativity is possible wherever human intelligence is actively engaged and is an essential part of an effective education: it includes all areas of understanding and all children, teachers and others working in primary education. Indeed, it can be demonstrated by anyone in any aspect of life, throughout life” [6: 360]. They add that creativity should not be seen as a product or an event, but as a process or a state of mind, which involves the serious play of ideas and possibilities [6]. Teresa Cremin (2015) defines creativity in the following way: “Creativity, in essence [is] the generation of novel ideas” [5: 4], and she also describes creativity as a process that “involves the capacity to generate, reason with and critically evaluate novel suppositions or imaginary scenarios. It is about thinking, problem solving, inventing and reinventing, and flexing one’s imaginative muscles and critical reflexivity” [5: 4-5]. The above definition underlines that critical thinking and the ability to evaluate processes and phenomena is the crucial part of being creative.

Teresa Cremin and Jonathan Barnes summarize the characteristic features of creating behaviour and learning as follows:

- it is often collaborative
- it uses the mind and the body, emotions, eyes, ears and all the senses
- it is an effort to face a challenge or solve a problem
- it may include physical, social, reflective, musical or visual thinking
- it involves learners’ activities that produce new and unusual connections between ideas, domains, processes and materials
- it is a process where learners and teachers step outside the boundaries of predictability
- it is a process where learners may be physically engaged [6].

The link between creative behaviour and motivation has also been examined and discussed since motivation can be the driving engine of a creative individual and plays an important role in developing creativity. Beth A. Hennessey claims that there is a link between task motivation and creative performance, which she believes is supported also by several theoreticians of the earliest psychoanalytical approaches to creativity (represented by Freud, White or Erikson) and the psychological study of creative behaviour [9: 342]. Hennessey points out that this theoretical link between task motivation and creative performance has laid important groundwork for research tradition [9: 342]. The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation began to be applied in studies and literature in the 1970s and is present in the discussion on the link between motivation and creative behaviour. Hennessey explains that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation play an important role in determining whether a creative product will be produced or a creative solution to a problem will be generated. She writes: “Motivational orientation marks the dividing line between what a creative individual is capable of doing and what he or she actually will do in a given situation” [9: 343]. People

who approach an activity or problem with intrinsic motivation are usually curious and engaged.

The differences and even the link between individual and group creativity need to be highlighted when discussing creative behaviour. Creativity does not occur in a vacuum, creative behaviour can be the result of cooperation and social interaction. The idea of the 'social learner' is very deeply incorporated in the theoretical background of creative teaching and learning as well as creative behaviour. Creativity is often discussed together with emotional intelligence, self-expression and social skills. For example, von de Water et al. (2015) insist on the importance of presenting opportunities for learners to develop skills in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). They point out that "SEL is also known as emotional intelligence, self-science, emotional literacy, and affective education, among other terms." [20: 159]. They emphasise a rather cognitive approach to creativity or the mixture of cognitive and systems approach to creativity when claiming the brain processes can be stimulated by social interaction, which can lead to a creative outcome or product.

Learning in a group certainly leads to several benefits, both cognitive and social. Theories of cooperative and collaborative learning have a long history. Abrami et al. (1995) provide several motivational and learning explanations of the valuable effects and advantages of cooperative learning. The interaction among group members raise motivation and has an influence on their understanding and cognitive processes [1]. Katherine McWhaw et al. (2003) highlight the phenomenon of 'positive interdependence' and explain that commitment to the group, the sense of trustworthiness promote learning, develop social skills and support self-regulated learning. They argue: "(...) successful learners are motivationally, cognitively and behaviourally active participant in their own learning" [12: 81-82]. They also add that it even works the other way round, which means that successful learners should take responsibility for their learning "such as those encountered in collaborative learning environments" [12: 83].

Based on the above, taking the theory of the social learner into account, it can be claimed that creative behaviour is closely connected with operating and working/learning in a group. Cooperative learning and social interaction can raise motivation and improve creative behaviour.

2. Educational Creativity

The role of schools and the education system in preparing individuals to face contemporary problems and challenges is the issue of constant debate and discussion (see Bánhidi – Simonek – Dobay 2018 [3], Jeffrey K. Smith and Lisa F. Smith [16], Szököl 2018 [17], Zolczer 2017 [22]). New social, environmental, economic problems need up-to-date and relevant solutions and we need to educate individuals who are ready not only to face but also to handle and solve these problems in a satisfactory way. However, contemporary schools are rarely praised for being able to develop creativity, problem-solving skills or practical skills. Mihály Csíkszentmihályi and Rustin Wolfe point out that a study of 91 exceptionally creative writers, musicians, businessmen, and Nobel-prize winning scientists reveals that these individuals almost never mentioned their elementary or secondary schools as having contributed to their success or having helped them to develop the interest and expertise that led them to their later achievements. Interestingly, Csíkszentmihályi points out that every person participating in the above study could mention one or two influential teacher, however, the classroom activities they generally remembered were boring and repressive [7: 161-162].

Csíkszentmihályi has elaborated the system model of creativity, which he claims is formally analogous to the model of evolution based on natural selection. He replaces the three

components of the model of biological selection – species, environment and organism – by culture, society and family background to proceed to the system of creativity and adds three more terms: domain, field and person to apply the model to educational institutions. He writes: “schools might be seen as consisting of the same three components; a body of knowledge to be transmitted (Domain), teachers who control the knowledge (Field), and finally a number of individuals, the students (Person), whose task is to learn the knowledge and who are evaluated by “teachers” in terms of their learning” [7: 168]. Csíkszentmihályi explains that this perspective makes clear why schools and creativity seem to be so mutually exclusive. He claims that “in a creative process, the point is to innovate on the content of the domain in such a way that the field will deem the innovation better than what existed before. But in schools, the point is for the students to replicate the content of the domain as closely as possible, without deviations. The teachers’ task is to ensure conformity with prior knowledge, without even trying to evaluate whether the students’ deviations might be ‘better’ than what is written in the textbooks. Thus the main task of schools is to transmit knowledge with as little change as possible (...)” [7: 168].

Practice shows that the majority of teachers focus on the transmission of authorized and approved knowledge base and skills and request students to acquire this knowledge and skills and reproduce them in a pre-determined way. Of course, there are teachers who pay much attention to the peculiar or uncommon responses of their students and appreciate their unique problem-solving strategies and practices and initiate critical thinking. These activities, however, are closely connected with several elements such as the personal qualities of the teacher, the level of the teacher’s own creativity as well as the attitude, approval and support of the school management. On the other hand, it needs to be noted that encouraging and developing student creativity cannot be carried out without knowing the basic content and knowledge base of a particular discipline. Knowing about basic facts and practices is inevitable. We cannot expect learners to use for instance a foreign language creatively and spontaneously in a certain communication activity without knowing certain words or structures in the given language. Therefore, the transmission of knowledge and skills is a must and the prerequisite of further application and the road to creative usage. From this perspective, learning can be seen as gathering data and preparation for later creativity when the learner has mastered the knowledge base to the point that s/he can make unique innovation and special contribution to the given discipline. Another important point is the form in which the given knowledge base is transmitted. Even at the stage of transmitting knowledge and skills in a given field, creativity must be incorporated in school practices. This is the point where the teacher’s creativity becomes crucial and to a certain extent the key of breakthrough.

2.1. The responsibilities of teacher training programmes

Teacher training programmes have a major role in offering future teachers a variety of creative teaching approaches and methods. However, providing an overview of such approaches and methods is not enough, trainees need to be given opportunities to try them in practice, to experiment with them in a safe environment, in a non-judgemental atmosphere.

Caroline Baillie (2006) describes a project, which was conducted by a group of university teachers and educational developers within the Learning and Teaching Support Network of the UK (LTSN) in 2003. The aim of the project was to carry out a knowledge transfer experiment and to share what researchers and lecturers knew about creative-thinking techniques with 15 academics in a 3-day training consisting of several workshops. These teachers – the participants of the workshops were then supposed to share this knowledge with their

colleagues in their institutions in order to help both their colleagues and students improve their creative potentials. The participants became facilitators and they organized further workshops to foster creative thinking [2].

The techniques Baillie and her team used in the above mentioned workshop were based on the intention of improving problem-solving and creative thinking. The framework of creative problem-solving Baillie describes in her article is based on four stages:

1. Preparation
2. Question formulation, clarification and reformulation
3. Purge, idea generation and incubation
4. Idea clustering, evaluation and action planning. [2: 143-144]

The greatest benefit of the above project lies in the fact that it understands creativity as a process and understands the crucial need of practicing teachers to be inspired and provided with help. Just like developmental theories, the workshops were based on the claim that creativity can and should be developed and similarly to problem-solving and problem-finding theories, the project offered problems to be pointed out and solved in order to facilitate participants to think outside the box and be ready to take risks.

Just expecting teachers to be creative is not sufficient unless they are provided appropriate opportunities to participate in creative approaches when developing their skills and pedagogical knowledge. Teacher training programmes have a crucial role in this process, since they also have to be the embodiment of creative teaching methods and must help not only teacher trainees but also already practicing teachers expand their vision and improve their beliefs and skills via constant professional trainings and meetings.

3. Creativity in the EFL classroom

Teachers often ask the question of how they can increase the creativity of their students and what kind of concrete steps should be taken in order to improve creativity in the foreign language classroom (see for example Kaufman and Sternberg [10], Xerri and Vassallo [22]). It is generally accepted that primary and secondary education should include the improvement of creativity of learners in their priorities; however, improving creativity within the framework of English as a foreign language involves more challenges and requires special reasoning.

One should not start with answering the question how EFL teachers should enhance the creative potential of their learners, but firstly it should be clarified why learners should learn to think creatively. Firstly, we need to improve learners' skills to make them acquire the foreign language more easily and to increase their effectivity in language learning. However, we need to think in the long term and widen our perspectives so that we understand that language learners in primary and secondary schools will use the foreign language for several different purposes. Perhaps they will become engineers, doctors or will have foreign friends to communicate with. We need to understand that improving creativity is not merely connected with improving language skills – though it can make language acquisition more effective and more stable – but is also closely linked with helping students solve problems more effectively and in innovative ways and helping them respond to the world appropriately.

EFL teachers have to handle a variety of problems and difficulties during their everyday teaching that many times prevent them from trying new methods of teaching or do further research in the field of creativity development. Such difficulties include demanding administration, large number of students in classes, financial difficulties, difficult parents or overwork. However, a teacher needs to overcome these difficulties in order to be inspirational for

his/her learners. Including creative activities and creative moments in everyday practices interspersed among non-creative lesson activities, meeting and cooperating with colleagues, participating in workshops and trainings are vital.

Learners in the EFL classroom must be reminded of the creative usage of language and the creative ways of language production and must be engaged in tasks that require critical thinking, original solutions, social interaction and cooperation. Another important task for an EFL teacher is to use appropriate teaching materials that stimulate learners' creativity and are engaging. Stephanie Xerri Agius describes stimulus-materials that can inspire learners and which can even elicit already existing knowledge from learners and which can provoke reactions and responses from learners. She lists the following features and principles of good stimulus-material:

1. It is worth examining closely.
2. It is likely to be interesting for the target audience.
3. It is challenging, not too hard and not too easy.
4. It offers opportunity for searching questions.
5. It is self-contained. [23: 70]

The usage of such materials provides opportunities for abandoning the traditional textbook and for achieving more enjoyment, improving creativity and being inspirational both for teachers and learners. Xerri Agius lists examples of stimulus-materials for writing purposes: using Twitter, using a voice recorder, a Smartphone, web-applications, using literature, poems, short stories, using real-life situations and photography, storyboard, mood board and animatic materials (cartoons, comics).

Using drama techniques (see Puskás [13]) and blended learning, web-applications (see Fehér – Szarka [8], Tóth-Bakos [18], Tóth-Bakos – Szarka – Brestenská [19], Puskás [14]) or using audio-visual media (see Zolczer [24]) in foreign language learning have a great potential in improving creativity and can be incorporated in everyday teaching practices.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Creativity is one of the most exciting and challenging concepts of contemporary English language teaching. The definition of creativity, the newest results of creativity research and theories of creativity can help educators and EFL teachers teach more effectively, be better at problem solving and inspire learners to become more creative.

The sociocultural approach to creativity points out that creativity is no more the subjective experience of an individual, but depends on the interplay of several social, cultural and historical elements and is rather a process, not a given personality trait. The Systems Model of creativity can help to understand that in education, creativity should be viewed in the context of cultural and social achievements and creativity can be fostered by cooperative learning.

In order to facilitate and improve creativity in the EFL classroom a highly collaborative, dynamic and safe atmosphere is needed where learners are inspired to think critically. Teachers need to believe wholeheartedly that there is place for creativity in the EFL classroom and that creativity should be improved. Teacher training programmes have to offer opportunities both for teacher trainees and practicing teachers to participate in trainings which should be the embodiment of creativity and critical thinking.

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