CREATIVE TEACHING, CREATIVE ASSESSMENT: LEARNER-CENTRED ASSESSMENT TOOLS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the role of creativity and its implication in the assessment process in the English as a foreign language classroom at primary and secondary schools. Creativity, more specifically the development of creativity has become one of the central goals of EFL classes, however, as it comes to assessment, the major assessment tool most frequently used by EFL teachers seems to be testing. The paper discusses the techniques and strategies suggested by alternative assessment or assessment for learning and proposes more learner-centred ways of assessment that involve creativity and have the potential to assess creativity in the foreign language classroom. Special attention is paid to learner-centred teaching as well as projects and portfolios as assessment tools.

KEYWORDS

Creativity, alternative assessment, project, portfolio, testing

INTRODUCTION

Creativity has become one of the key terms of contemporary education and more and more attention is paid to the implementation of creativity in schools. The practices of a learner-centred foreign language classroom cannot avoid creative solutions and must offer opportunities for learners to generate new ideas, involve intuition and foster divergent thinking in order to make learners more involved in the learning process and make them more motivated. The shift from a teacher-centred approach to teaching to a more learner-based approach presupposes the redefinition of teacher roles and the reinterpretation of the teacher – learner relationship. The teacher is no more the authoritative figure transmitting knowledge, but rather an assistant, a helper and a prompter.

Assessment is a crucial part of the educational process, however, effective assessment must take a variety of significant principles into consideration. One of these principles is that during the assessment process, the major focus should be put on items that have been covered during the teaching process. Therefore, it is reasonable to ask: if the development of creativity receives such a central role during the process of learning, how is it present during assessment?

The major goal of the present paper is to highlight the role of creativity in a learner-centred environment in the English as a foreign language classroom and to outline the basic potentials of implying the principles of a creative, learner-centred classroom in the process of assessment. The necessity of changing perspectives in the field of assessment is underlined. Alternative assessment or assessment for learning has identified the changing needs of contemporary needs in EFL teaching and has the potential to offer space for creativity.

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1. **The Role of Creativity in the Foreign Language Classroom**

Theories of creativity have a long history in foreign language education as well and creativity researchers have offered a set of definitions and classification (Craft 2000, Kozbelt, Beghetto and Runco 2010, Kauffman and Sternberg 2010, Csíkszentmihályi 2014, Nagy 2019, Marosi 2019, Zolczer 2019, Szőköl 2020, Szőköl and Horváthová 2020, just to mention a few). The rise of creativity and the special attention it has recently received is very closely connected to the shift from the traditional teacher-centred approach to teaching to a more learner-centred approach, one that understands learning as a process rather than the outcome or final product of knowledge transmission. Learner-centred approaches to foreign language teaching emphasise the individual differences between learners and regard learners as active participants of their own learning process. A learner-centred approach involves learners actively, makes them cooperate with each other and respects their learning styles, while the teacher takes a more passive role. Such an environment provides space for the development of creativity.

1.1.**Developing a Learner-Centred Atmosphere**

A very important skill in teaching is making learners the main focus of the teaching process. It is crucial to set this priority and avoid the preference of other factors such as the coursebook, the curriculum or any other external elements. Even today in the twenty-first century, many teachers get stressed if they cannot 'teach the curriculum' within a given period of time or they cannot get to the end of the coursebook by the end of the school year. It should be a widely accepted principle that the teacher does not teach the coursebook, but the learners. Putting learners into the first place also involves taking the variety of learner characteristics into consideration, characteristic features such as learning styles, learner preferences, interests, needs, intelligence, previous learning experience, cultural background, attitudes toward learning the foreign language, motivation or the learner's personality are factors that have a huge impact on learning outcomes and contribute to the success of foreign language teaching and leaerning.

Learner-centred teaching focuses on individualized learning and accepts that each learner has a unique pace and way of learning, which needs to be respected. Although it seems impossible to satisfy the diversity of learner needs during each lesson, it is vital to use strategies that make the lesson engaging for all learners. A shift from curriculum-based or teacher-centred teaching to a more learner-centred approach to teaching can be indicated by several factors:

- The amount of teacher talking time compared to the amount of student talking time. Increasing student talking time also increases learner involvement and engagement. The learner becomes an active participant of the lesson.
- The amount of student interaction. The lesson should involve and vary several types of organization, i.e. pair work, group work and individual work in order to increase learner participation and develop cooperation.
- The flexibility of the teacher's lesson plan. The lesson prepared by the teacher and the lesson plan actually taught might be completely different, since several factors can affect the speed of the lesson as well as the teaching process. Instead of sticking to the original plan rigidly, the teacher should be ready to change the lesson plan based on the arousing events, the needs of the learners and current classroom situation. It is necessary to reshape the plan based on learners' feedback.
- Mapping learners' characteristics. At the beginning of the course or school year, the teacher should find out learning styles and learning preferences by specific

questionnaires and by observing students (using observation sheets) so that the teacher can adjust the methods and techniques of teaching to learners' needs.

1.2. The Role of Creativity in a Learner-Centred Classroom

Encouraging creativity in a learner-centred classroom is connected with the belief that there is an increased need to engage learners in their process of learning as well as develop their ability to think creatively.

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" [5: 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 (…)" [5: 168].

In a traditional classroom, 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. However, in a learner-centred classroom, there is a significant shift from knowledge transmission to the process of learning. Therefore, one of the most crucial tasks of contemporary schools is to open up the 'Domain' and give space for students ('Person') to experiment with the 'Domain' and take several perspectives while examining it.

When discussing the potentials of creativity development in the EFL classroom, Antonia Clare (2016) highlights that there are four major factors linked with creative thinking that need to be kept in mind and refers to J. Alvino's framework (Alvino 1990, quoted in Clare [2: 47]):

1) Fluency – the ability to generate lots of ideas
2) Flexibility – the ability to shift perspective to have a variety of ideas
3) Elaboration – building on existing ideas, connecting and re-arranging them
4) Originality – the ability to come up with something completely new

Creativity, therefore, is deeply connected with idea generation and the ability to take different perspectives.

Clare also underlines the importance of differentiating between creative thinking and critical thinking – a very useful distinction, though both skills belong to the most crucial areas and topics of contemporary education. She explains that critical thinking involves more convergent thinking, the kind of thinking that focuses on coming up with one particular answer to a problem, e.g. a multiple-choice question. On the other hand, Clare claims, creative thinking is divergent, where many spontaneous ideas are generated and evaluated, several possible solutions are explored within a short period of time and unexpected connections are drawn. While critical thinking is more about logic, reason, judgment and critique, creative thinking is rather about idea generation, intuition and suspended judgement. [2: 48]

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 [4].

With its emphasis on learner characteristics, the learning process and the need for cooperation among learners, the learner-centred classroom provides adequate soil for the development of creativity and the implementation of creativity tasks in the EFL classroom. A learner-centred atmosphere has more tolerance and patience for learners' exploratory learning, which can occur by drawing out lessons from interactions, extracting meaning from data independently and experimenting with and trying out several practices and generating new ideas.

2. Assessing Creativity

Assessment has been a significant part of the education process, since it provides feedback not only about learning outcomes, the learners' achievements, but also about the teacher, the appropriateness of the teacher's methods, techniques and strategies implemented during the educational process. Assessment shows whether educational goals have been achieved, whether certain areas need to be revised or whether the learning process has been successful or not. The choice of assessment tools reflects the teacher's attitude to the learning and teaching process to a great extent.

2.1.Traditional Assessment Tools

Traditionally, assessment has been carried out in a written form, the form of tests or quizzes with several typical test items such as multiple-choice, true-false questions, open questions, fill-in the blank, matching, writing essays, translating lists of vocabulary items, etc. The purpose of these standardized tests is to measure whether learners have met specific objectives and goals or they have learnt specific language items after a given period of learning. Most schools request teachers to prepare tests for their classes and check what learners have studied in a written form. Tests are the most common basis for assessment; they are easy to design and check and are generally accepted as reliable bases for giving grades.

Traditional assessment methods, however, have received huge criticism (especially by the defenders of learner-centred approaches) and are often claimed to be narrow-minded and limited. Annamaria Pinter claims that traditional tests "are often favoured by teachers because they are relatively easy to set and correct and they reduce language knowledge to points, marks, and grades, i.e. quantifiable results. However, in the case of younger children especially, these tests often do not work because such isolated exercises do not show what children know and can do with confidence" [13: 132]. The activities carried out in the language classroom do not have a written form only, it is a variety of different speaking, listening and reading activities. Especially in the lower level of primary school, learning takes place in a relaxed, playful atmosphere, where usually plenty of playful and creative activities are implemented during teaching. This definitely must be reflected in the way these learners are assessed. This means

that assessment methods must include creativity and playfulness as well; otherwise it can happen that assessment turns out to be one-sided, testing only one element of a very complex teaching and learning process.

Another important aspect of testing that has become the target of sharp criticism is grading. Tests can be graded in various ways, e.g. by giving learners grades, numbers from 1 to 5, or percentages or letters (e.g. A, B, C). Lower grades can discourage learners and make them lose motivation by giving them the false message that they could not succeed in handling the tested language skill or language item though a single grade cannot provide a satisfactory feedback.

Tests are claimed to be misleading sometimes, they are not always valid (not always testing what they say they are) e.g. a listening test based on long multiple-choice written questions may actually test reading rather than listening comprehension. Another drawback of tests is that students with test anxiety might not perform well under test conditions. If tests are the basis for crucial summative assessment in the student's career or an important contributor to their final grade, they can be extremely stressful.

2.2. Assessment for Learning

Several scholars have criticised traditional assessment approaches and tools, especially testing, and have expressed concern about teachers teaching to the test. Dylan William (2002) poses several provocative questions:

- Why are pupils tested as individuals, when the world of work requires people who can work well in a team?
- Why do we test memory, when in the real world engineers and scientists rarely rely on memory? When they do not know something, they look it up.
- Why do we use timed tests, when it is usually more important to get things done right than get things done quickly? [18: 61-62]

William prefers an approach that would support teachers' own judgements of pupil achievement, and suggests that all forms of testing should be avoided.

Alternative or performance-based assessment is also known as assessment for learning. Pierce and O'Malley (1992) define alternative assessment as "any method of finding out what a student knows or can do that is intended to show growth and inform instruction and is not a standardized or traditional test" [12: 2]. Alternative assessment is frequently called assessment for learning, by which scholars emphasize that this type of assessment concentrates on the improvement of learning – i.e. the process – rather than testing learners' achievements – i.e. the result. Therefore, it is more likely to fit in the framework of learner-centred approaches to foreign language teaching.

Alternative assessment methods also take into consideration the improvement of the learners' critical thinking. Thinking critically about the learning process, assessing their own performance and the performance of their peers are all phenomena that lead to the improvement of critical thinking. The teacher can do much in order to encourage learners to think logically and use their creativity to the greatest extent. Effective questioning is another factor that contributes to the development of the learners' cognitive or 'thinking' skills. If the teacher wishes to assess learner's knowledge and wants to check understanding by asking questions, s/he needs to make sure that s/he asks the right questions. Instead of yes-no questions, it is more beneficial to ask WH-questions i.e. open-ended questions. It does not only reduce the number of guesses, it also gives learners the change to think more deeply and express their own ideas.

The most central principles of alternative assessment or assessment for learning can be summarized in the following way:

- the process of learning is more emphasized than the result;

- assessment is seen as a tool to assist and help the learner rather than a threatening tool;
- the relationship between the teacher and the learner is redefined, they become more like partners, where the teacher uses assessment tasks to reflect on which areas should be covered again to help learning;
- the learner becomes an active participant of the assessment process by being involved in discussions about learning, assessment criteria as well as learning objectives;
- the necessity of self-assessment and peer-assessment is more emphasized than in traditional assessment methods;
- assessment is also used as a motivational tool to inspire learners to understand their learning process, by giving them feedback on which areas to focus on more and hints on how to improve.

2.3. The Assessment of Creativity and Assessment for Creativity

When discussing the place of creativity in the field of assessment, it is necessary to differentiate between the assessment of creativity and creative assessment (or in other words assessment for creativity).

Assessing and measuring creativity have been a popular research topic. The assessment of creativity is about identifying specific features that differentiate creative behaviour or creative products from non-creative ones, in addition, the levels or degrees of creativity can be specified. Jonathan A. Plucker and Matthew C. Makel (2010) [14] claim that researchers have used psychometric measures of creative process widely for decades. They explain that psychometric methods in creativity research are typically grouped into four types of investigations:

1) creative processes
2) personality and behavioural correlates of creativity
3) characteristics of creative products
4) attributes of creativity-fostering environments [14: 51]

Though all four areas have received much attention by researchers, non-academics, practicing teachers are more interested in the practical implementation of creativity during the particular stages of teaching.

Assessment for creativity, however, is a type of assessment – or rather an attitude to assessment – which enables learners indicate and even develop their creativity. It heavily relies on intrinsic motivation and provides learners with assessment tasks that offer them opportunities to generate new ideas, use unusual combinations and explore new perspectives. It means, that both in case of traditional assessment tools and alternative assessment tools, it is necessary to incorporate tasks that foster learners' creativity and enable them to indicate their creativity and creative thinking.

Some concrete examples of tasks that can be included in creative assessment when it comes to written tasks:

- Choose the odd-one-out from the list of words.
- Draw a mind map/circle including as many word connected with transport (a specific topic or area of vocabulary) as you can.
- Match the words that belong together.
- Choose 5 words from a list of words and write a short story beginning with the sentence: "It was a rainy morning and everyone felt tired."
- Writing poetry – it can be done either from a given set of words or it does not need to be limited, can be based on learners' own choices of words.

- Reconstruct the poem – the words of a short poem (e.g. sonnet, haiku) are mixed up, learners are asked to rearrange words to reconstruct the original text.
- Think of 2 possible unusual ways these items can be used for (pen, pencil, toothbrush, raincoat)
- Create new words out of a list of given letters. You can use each letter only once.
- Ask questions from a famous pop star – learners are asked to write down questions they would ask from a given celebrity.
- Rhymes – write words that rhyme with the given words (e.g. five – pride, side, kite).

As far as assessment for learning is concerned, Shin and Crandal (2014) list eight forms of alternative assessment:
1) Observations
2) Conference and oral interviews
3) Story or text retellings
4) Writing samples
5) Projects
6) Portfolios
7) Other performances
8) Self- or peer-assessments [15: 258]

We have selected two basic techniques of alternative assessment: portfolios and projects, which will be examined in the following sections.

3. Portfolios and Projects

Working with portfolios and projects is based on the assumption that learners should have a concrete learning outcome they can be proud of and can regard as the specific evidence of their learning process. Both portfolios and projects provide opportunities for collecting evidence of learners' creativity and a variety of their work as well as opportunities for demonstrating creative work in progress. They both involve self-assessment – when creating portfolios and projects, and peer assessment – when it comes to the presentation and evaluation of portfolios and projects.

3.1. Portfolios
The roots of portfolio assessment date back to the mid-1980s with the work of Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff. They published several papers and books on the "portfolio explosion that has gained steady strength since we [i.e. Elbow and Belanoff] started our experiment in 1983 at Stony Brook" [6]. Since then several scholars and practitioners have suggested designing standards for using portfolios for assessing student work and emphasising the process of learning (e.g. Sandra Murphy in 1997).

A portfolio collects the student's work from the beginning until a later stage of development. It is not the collection of the student's best works. Students set goals for their portfolios and decide which works to include. Georgia Brooke and Heidi Andrade define process portfolios in the following way:

> "A process portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that documents student growth from novice to master. Successful process portfolios actively engage students in their creation, especially in determining their goals, selecting work to be included, and reflecting on how each piece demonstrates progress toward their goals". [1]

Several significant elements are emphasized in the above quote. Firstly, portfolio assessment and the compilation of the portfolio involve the learner, who becomes a very active participant not only in the learning process, but also in assessing his or her achievements and performance as well. Secondly, Brooke and Andrade highlight that learners need to be informed about learning goals and have to identify with these goals. This change in perspective suggests that learners are more motivated in language learning and in reaching goals when they become active agents in the process. It also suggests that by choosing pieces of work to be put into their portfolios, learners develop their skills of assessment, making judgements and critical thinking. They reflect on their own ideas and work.

Katy Hall and Kieron Sheehy (2014) claim that classes can have individual portfolios and also 'class' or even 'school' portfolios. Individual portfolios can be connected to one particular subject – English, and one particular student, but even classes can have portfolios, where the teacher puts samples of students' work [7: 327]. They also suggest having an individual literacy portfolio, where students can put lists of books read, written responses to stories, drawings or paintings in response to literary works, and so on [7: 327].

3.2. Projects

Project work is one of the most popular forms of alternative assessment, where learners become more involved and active in the learning process. This form of work integrates more skills, e.g. drawing, reading, speaking, etc., therefore, it is suitable for integrated assessment. Projects can be developed individually, in pairs or in groups. When working in pairs or groups, learners need to cooperate and reach the final result through joint effort.

The group members need to be selected very carefully. Projects can work well in mixed-ability classes, where weaker students can benefit from other classmates, and stronger students can show and share their knowledge by supporting and explaining to others. It is very important that the roles of each group member is clearly set and defined so that everyone knows what he or she needs to do in order to avoid inappropriate division of tasks – it could happen that one person does the job and the rest of the learners just relax and do not contribute at all.

When project work is applied, it should be preceded by clarifying the goals of the project or the task so that learners know exactly what the criteria are and what the specific aims to be fulfilled are. Projects are great examples of interdisciplinary learning, since learners are given the chance to explore links across the curriculum. While working on a project, they can combine written language with music, art, drama or science.

It is very difficult to assess projects with traditional grades, because the cooperation of the group, their problem-solving skills and creativity needs to be taken into account as well. It is more recommended to use extensive written feedback to projects.

The teacher's work does not stop after setting the task and starting learner's independent work while working on a project, the teacher becomes a prompter and an assistant and is provided free space to a more flexible and intimate communication with learners. There are opportunities for one-to-one consultations with learners, which offers the potential of deepening the relationship between the teacher and the learner and allows the teacher to pay more attention to the individual needs of each learner.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In order to foster creativity in the EFL classroom at primary and secondary schools, it is important to create a relaxed and stimulating learning environment, where learning is understood as a process during which the individual characteristics of learners must be

tolerated. A shift from traditional, instructive teaching to a learner-centred approach is unavoidable. Learner-centred teaching has great benefits not only for learners but also for teachers, since both become more focused on the learning process and will understand how learning occurs more appropriately and efficiently. A learner-centred approach to foreign language teaching has an impact on the choice of methods, techniques and activities as well as on the assessment tools that aim at collecting feedback on how successful the learning process has been.

Alternative assessment tools provide more space for learners to implement, demonstrate and even develop their creativity. When connecting creativity with assessment, teachers must keep in mind the difference between assessing creativity and creative assessment. Implementing creativity in everyday teaching practices and during assessment contributes to a deeper engagement of learners which leads to more sustainable learning. When designing assessment tools (written assignments, portfolios or projects), it is necessary to offer meaningful tasks that facilitate creativity, critical thinking, cooperation and collaboration, establishing interdisciplinary links. Similarly, when responding to learners' works, written or oral feedback is recommended encouraging learners to continue their process of learning and helping them become autonomous and creative learners.

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