



REFLECTIONS OF CREATIVITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Creativity has long been on the agenda of those innovative and inspirational teachers who have devoted themselves to doing their jobs more effectively. 21st century teachers are required to fit their skills, abilities and thinking skills into the latest improvements and changes in effective learning pedagogies and look for ways not only to make necessary adaptations in their curriculum, but also go beyond to stimulate learners to develop certain thinking skills to learn. Drawing on an action research, this study focuses on innovative teaching strategies and some out-of-the-box ideas about the way teachers should convert their ideas to be effective in class to shed a new light on effective teaching. With this aim in mind, the study concentrated on investigating the effect of the creativity on the overall success of the 40 intermediate level students learning English. The study conducted employed a quasi-experimental research design. The researcher designed various creative activities and techniques on the basis of three models: The Simplex Process Model (Basadur, 1995), CATWOE (Checkland, 1960) and the Reframing Matrix Tool (Morgan, 1993). These activities were then applied them in her English language classes. As a result of the activities and techniques implemented in foreign language classes, it was noted that there are certain advantages to using creative activities in EFL classes. These include: (i) developing students' divergent thinking skills, memory power, brain processing speed, critical thinking skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills through facilitating active participation and student engagement, insights and conflict resolution; (ii) improving students' concentration through mindfulness and nasal breathing practice; (iii) encouraging an atmosphere of openness; (iv) involving direct and experiential learning; (v) promoting lifelong learning. Development of such knowledge and skills through creative activities based on theoretical models fosters 21st century skills which are crucial for the learners in today's world.

Keywords: Creativity, 21st century learners, reflections, innovative teaching activities.

Introduction

The growing need for designing current and up-to-date activities and materials is impossible to ignore in any given field of education. Globalization and constantly changing nature of information led to the need for learners of all levels to access the most up-to-date information in the most rapid way possible. The conditions of 21st century and globalizations changed the profile of learners as well as the knowledge and skills they need to be taught. In parallel to these changes, teachers need to continuously improve their teaching skills as well as the techniques and activities they use. Creative activities ensure learners' active

participation and keep their interest alive through the lessons. In the history of English language teaching methodologies, post-method era proved that there is no single best method and an eclectic approach with creative activities and techniques is the ideal approach to teaching. The use of creative activities does not only engage students in the lesson but also improve their critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, increase cultural awareness and sensitivity through tolerance education and establish a multicultural world perspective towards people and problems.

The need to focus more on creativity is driven by the need of the professional world becoming more competitive and the shift from test-driven approach to learner-centeredness in educational institutions (Richards, 2013). It was also highlighted that creative teaching is believed to increase learners' motivation as well as self-esteem and equip them with skills needed to survive in a competitive professional world. Creativity also enriches lives of individuals leading to a better society.

Additionally, creativity is not only beneficial in the field of education but also in other fields such as workplace leadership (Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999); adult vocational and life success (Torrance, 1972, 1981); healthy psychological functioning, coping, and emotional growth (Kin & Pope, 1999; Russ, 1998); maintenance of healthy, loving relationships (Livingston, 1999); and more effective therapeutic treatments (Kendall, Chu, Gifford, Hayes, & Nauta, 1998).

In the last few decade, it was stated that creativity in classrooms was rare occurrence (Guilford, 1950; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999) due to traditional classroom setting and teaching styles (Furman, 1998; Torrance, 1968) and the non-existence of the creativity element in the curricula (Archambault Jr, Westberg, Brown, Hallmark, Zhang, & Emmons, 1993). Creativity in the field of education is crucial as it fosters academic achievement. Fisher (2004) argued that relevant studies acknowledged the value of creative skills and that learners' academic success increases in parallel to their creative abilities. Creativity, also, engages students to school setting again if learners are demotivated along with teachers who have lost their inspiration due too overly controlling nature of traditional methods.

The place of creativity in foreign language education has recently become more popular as a result of the changes in the educational policies taking place in all parts of the world. The growing use of constructivism in education requires teachers to move away from standardized traditional tests and tasks to more creative activities that will improve learners' skills needed to survive in the 21st century such as collaborative learning, analyzing and reflecting on different situations and problem-solving.

Popular approaches used for language teaching were based on behaviorism which focused on observable actions rather than mental processes. Such an approach would include individual activities where each action is assessed, then rewarded or punished like rewarding learners for doing their homework. This process is known as conditioning. Drills are a popular technique for this approach where learners are given the opportunity for review their answer before repeating it or they receive some sort of verbal or non-verbal punishment. Behaviorism, as the name suggests, focuses on changes in the behavior which are triggered by a stimulus and positive behavior is rewarded or praised. Continuous reinforcement leads to conditioned behavior.

The belief that "behaviorism is clearly at the heart of, and the key to the success of, programmed learning" (Pritchard, 2009) is not acceptable in this era where competition is at its highest level in the professional world. Learners will be required to be able to move away from programmed learning in their professional lives and they need to interact, discuss, agree or disagree with colleagues in team through an effective manner. Hence, teachers need to make a shift in their teaching as well as the material and activities they use towards 21st

century skills needed by the learners. Behaviorist approaches were criticized mainly for two issues: (i) rewarding will cause learners to lose interest in the learning activity throughout the time; (ii) focusing on rewarding certain learners will alienate the others in class and make them feel left out, thus resulting in their loss of interest and motivation (Pritchard, 2009).

In contrast to Behaviorists, “Constructivists view learning as the result of mental construction. That is, learning takes place when new information is built into and added onto an individual’s current structure of knowledge, understanding and skills” Pritchard (2009). In other words, constructivism supports the idea that individuals learn best when understanding is constructed rather than memorized.

Constructivism and social constructivism believe in the process of constructing knowledge and understanding rather than acquiring or memorizing it. This process occurs through individual experiences and testing assumptions via experiences. Thus, knowledge is interpreted and constructed differently by each individual based on his or her personal experience as well as cultural background.

The principles of constructivism require learners to search for and then construct their own understanding and this motivates them and keeps them engaged. Planned implementation of this process is named as ‘scaffolding’ (Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding is the process of giving support to learners at the appropriate time and at the appropriate level of sophistication to meet the needs of the individual. Scaffolding can be provided through discussions, materials, pair or group work to socially construct knowledge and understanding.

A learning theory based on constructivism should have these four characteristics: interactive process between what is already known and what is to be learnt; social process; situated process; and a metacognitive process (Wray & Lewis, 1997). Based on these characteristics, four principles of teaching were also suggested: (i) Learners require sufficient previous knowledge to learn new things and make connections; (ii) anticipation should be established for social interaction through group discussions with different number of people; (iii) situating topics into meaningful contexts is significant; (iv) learners should be encouraged to be aware of their own thought process through their learning (Wray & Lewis, 1997).

Richards (2013) suggested certain issues regarding creativity to consider as well: evaluating existing circumstances as well as new approaches and this requires skills and calls for intuition on the teachers’ parts. The following eight characteristics try to summarize a creative teacher’s qualities:

- Have a strong learning base
- Be confident
- Be committed to students’ success
- Be a non-conformist
- Be familiar with a variety of techniques
- Be willing to take risks
- Focus on learner-centred lessons
- Be reflective

As can be seen from the relevant literature, there are many theories and teaching methods in favor of using creativity in foreign language classrooms. The theoretical groundwork of the current study comes from three main problem-solving theories: The Simplex Process Model (Basadur, 1995), CATWOE (Checkland, 1960) and the Reframing Matrix Tool (Morgan, 1993). This aims to show that not only language teaching methods and theories but also theories and models from various fields can be adapted to foreign language teaching in order to improve 21st century teaching skills and implement creative activities.

The first model is Basadur's (1995) Simplex Process Model used to find creative ways to problem-solving. The model enables to combine creative problem-solving process with skills and tools. The model consists of eight steps within three main stages. The first stage is problem formulation stage which includes the three initial steps: (i) problem finding – continuously looking for or anticipating potential problems; (ii) fact finding – collecting information or data about a controversial situation and filtering the facts that would contribute to the next step of problem definition; (iii) problem definition – asking challenging questions to best define the problem through mind-mapping and making connections among concepts. The second stage, solution formulation, consists of the next two steps: (iv) idea finding – brainstorming about possible solutions to aimed problems; (v) evaluating and selecting – developing criteria to choose among possible solutions through cause and effect analysis. The last stage involves the final three steps and acknowledges that creating a solution is not sufficient unless it is effectively applied: (vi) action planning – planning the steps to be followed for the preparation of the solution implementation; (vii) gaining acceptance – acknowledges the best plan for action and sells the idea through effective advertising strategies; (viii) action taking – following the establishment of the problem, solution and the steps to implement the solution, action is taken to actually implement the steps planned and execute the solution.

The second model is more like a checklist offered to follow for effective problem-solving named as CATWOE by Checkland (1960). The word CATWOE is the acronym made up of the initial of each checklist item in the process of evaluating the system within the problem occurred and this feature distinguishes this model from the others. The first item in the checklist is customers, which means the beneficiaries of the problem and how the problem affects them should be identified. Actors, as the second element of the checklist, represent recognizing the parties involved in the problem. The next element, transformation, focuses on the single process in the system that will turn the input into output. The fourth element world view requires looking at the bigger picture and the impacts of the issue at a larger scale. Another element is the owner as the person in charge of the system who has the power to change it. The final element focuses on environmental factors that may interfere with the operating of the system such as physical conditions, laws and regulations, ethical concerns, etc.

The third model is the Reframing Matrix model suggested by Morgan (1993) in attempt to help with the understanding of a given problem from different perspectives and find suitable solutions. The model suggests three steps to follow through: The first step is drawing a grid with four squares with a blank space in the center of the grid. The second step is deciding on the four perspectives. These perspectives are: product perspective which focuses on the product itself to see if there are any problems regarding the product, its price, its reliability and how it serves the market; the second perspective is planning perspective emphasizing the strengths and weaknesses of the business or marketing plans and how they can be improved; the third is potential perspective highlighting the potential for increasing sales or productivity and how this can affect the problem; and the last perspective is the people perspective focusing on the impact and implications of the problem on the people, and what do the people involved think about the problem. Considering these four perspectives allows rooms to see the problem from different viewpoints and consider various options. The final step is brainstorming elements linked with the problem from each of the four perspectives and connecting the results with the appropriate quadrant in the grid. Upon completing the matrix, the problem will be better understood and more solutions can be generated.

Method

Study design

This study can be considered as an action research where the researcher designed various creative activities and techniques and applied them in her English language classes. The study adopted a quasi-experimental design working with 40 Intermediate level English learners. The researcher worked with two of her classes; in one class students were taught through creative activities while in the other class, students were taught through traditional method using mostly course books. Majority of the creative activities are designed as problem-solving activities to foster active student engagement and stimulate students' various skills in addition to language learning.

Based on the relevant literature and the models taken as the basis of this study, the researcher implemented certain activities and tasks in her EFL classes in order to stretch students' creativity, problem-solving and critical thinking skills:

- Brainteasers,
- Jokes,
- Riddles,
- Care and share sessions to make learning personal,
- Simple Mathematics questions,
- Writing captions for pictures,
- Debates,
- Pair and group work activities,
- Preparing questionnaires,
- Preparing radio/conference talk shows,
- Writing letter of advice,
- Role-play,
- Mind-mapping,
- Brainstorming,
- Brochure making,
- Field trips, and
- Word of the day activities.

In addition to these activities, the researcher also used another set of activities to help learners develop self-awareness and self-reflection including:

- Mirroring,
- 'I was surprised when...'
- 'Today, I learnt ...'
- 'I really wonder ...'
- 'I would have liked...'
- 'Class would be more interesting if ...'
- 'Now, I understand ...'
- 'I wish ...'

Sample lesson plan

The characteristics and principles suggested by constructivism, social constructivism and creative teaching were all considered by the researcher while designing new materials and activities for creative lessons. A lesson designed to help students go beyond their usual way of thinking and gain new insights based on The Simplex Process Model (Basadur, 1995) follows the following steps:

The first stage of the Model focuses on problem formulation through three steps: (a) Drawing a circle at the center of the board and writing a topic for students to generate related words such as 'environment'; (b) Allowing each learner to come up to the board and write down the words they know about the given topic such as dirty, pollution, famine, drought, global warming, and natural disasters, showing more related words through projection and eliciting them from the students; (d) Getting students focus on certain problems linked to the topic such as air pollution or global warming followed by adding more problems such as water shortage or noise.

The second stage is about solution formulation in two steps: (e) Putting the class into two groups: one of them brainstorms the causes and effects for water shortage while the other group follows the same procedure for air pollution; (f) Preparing problem cases about air pollution one of which can be a rich businessman who wants to cut down all trees surrounding the student's home and build a large factory. Local citizens are against this and they start to protest the businessman. The problem question is: What should the businessman do to overcome this problem?

The last stage is about solution implementation and in classroom setting it can be done as follows: (g) Upon identifying the problem, the students are asked to list specific actions to implement the possible solutions; (h) students are paired up and asked to suggest various solutions to each other's problems by using the words they have listed in the beginning of the lesson; (i) at the final step, the students are asked whether they accept any of the suggested solutions, if they are convinced about the feasibility of the solutions suggested by their peers.

Implementing such a lesson enables students to brainstorm words and produce ideas linked to a given topic as well as allowing them to discuss and try to persuade each other. The students will be able to support their ideas and arguments with examples and provide rationale for their responses. They will also have to think carefully to prepare problem cases as well as being creative when offering solutions. Pair and group work allows them to listen carefully, respond effectively to each other and learn turn-taking in conversations which will in turn; improve their critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Data Collection Instruments and Analysis

The study used teacher's diary and student interviews to collect in-depth qualitative data during the implementation of the creative activities. The teacher's diary consisted of the teacher's reflections about the stages of the lesson; the materials and activities done in class; teacher's observation about students' interest and participation in class activities; challenges students and teacher faced during the day while learning/teaching; rapport among students and teacher; and level of the materials. The diary was filled throughout the week during which the researcher implemented creative materials and activities.

After completing the implementation of newly designed materials and activities in a week, the researcher approached the students of the control group and the experimental group and informed them about the study. After receiving students' consents, the research conducted one-to-one semi-structured interviews with half of the students from both groups. The

interviews aimed to gather students' reflections on the traditional teaching methods and activities from the control group; and reflections of students on the newly designed materials and activities from the experimental group. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes and they were audio-recorded.

Both of the data collection instruments were first piloted and then, finalized upon expert opinion. The data gathered from teacher's diary and student interviews were analyzed through content analysis.

Findings

The results from the content analysis of the teacher's diary revealed a number of findings in relation to the teachers' opinions on the integration of creative activities into EFL curriculum. The major findings can be summarized as: (i) after a certain period of time students started to feel more empowered and were more interested in learning and eager to seek new experiments and learning experiences; (ii) learning in such a comfortable environment enabled students to verbalize their thoughts more freely; (iii) the students have the responsibility to learn to apply various creativity strategies depending on their own interest; (iv) the students learned to feel ownership in their successes and failures; giving them an opportunity to make mistakes fostered creativity. In this way they learned to find ideas that would otherwise have never been discovered; (v) they need autonomy to make choices about what seems important. Without student choices and ownership, the student's motivation to be creative is lost; (vi) to teach the creative process, the teacher usually avoided posting charts that gives answer unless the students themselves have invented the charts. The teacher might ask the students to do experiments; (vii) in foreign language learning the students discovered that knowing the grammar rules do not work if they do not use them in and out of the classroom. They made foreign friends and started interacting with them; (viii) the teacher experienced and the students discovered that creativity develops through observation, experience, and imagination so the teacher tried to relate her way of teaching to the students' needs, lesson that are based on rules, copy work, examples, and demonstrations are less apt to encourage creativity; and the teacher was patient enough to see that the creative process takes time, and it has some other stages as well like preparation, incubation, insight, elaboration, and evaluation.

The semi-structured interviews conducted with the students aimed to find out about students' perceptions regarding creative classrooms and creative activities practiced in foreign language classrooms. The responses from the semi-structured interviews revealed that most of the students found creative way of teaching confusing (as the teacher was always encouraging them to think and brainstorm ideas) and that creative way of teaching is not easy to understand (the teacher asked them to make associations). It was also reported that some students found creative lessons challenging and gave up participating while most of the students did not know how to take notes during the lessons. It was interesting that most of the students notes their anger towards the teacher because she did not write grammar rules on the board and not asked the students to memorize the grammar rules, vocabulary, or any other information for the tests. Also, most of the students were surprised about the friendly rapport among teacher and students. They stated that they had never thought and experienced that a teacher would be so approachable so they felt themselves comfortable and it caused them to ask more questions as the time went by. As expected by the researcher, most of the students kept silent during the class so as not to make mistakes while speaking; communication among students was good but they preferred talking in their native tongue after class; some of

the students asked for more grammar lessons in class; some of the students asked for more extra materials which help them get prepared for the tests; some students felt happy being given responsibilities in class such as checking whether everyone prepared a question before the class on Mondays; most of the students enjoyed some interactive activities in class as they had a chance to improve their speaking skills and developed their friendship with their classmates. The students also found mind-mapping a very useful strategy to relate ideas while some students found brainstorming difficult as their level of English limited them to express their ideas in English (lack of vocabulary). Lastly, most of the students enjoyed doing mini projects and sharing them with classmates in class; and some students defined creativity as having lots of imaginative, unrealistic ideas whereas others stated that creativity enables them to solve problems easily.

Discussion and Conclusion

To sum up, the creative activities and techniques applied in foreign language classes throughout this study are based on three main theories focusing on problem-solving skills: The Simplex Process Model (Basadur, 1995), CATWOE (Checkland, 1960) and the Reframing Matrix Tool (Morgan, 1993). Clearly, these are not very recent theories or models so the key point here is to remember updating teaching skills based on grounded theories and establish a positive change and creativity in classrooms.

The study showed that creativity in foreign language teaching is significant due to various reasons and factors including: the need to increase the quality of foreign language teaching; helping learners to gain lifelong skills; enhancing pedagogical knowledge and experience; the shift in educational policies; changes in students' learning; making learning more fun, exciting and motivating; change in the profile of the graduates; high level of competition in the world; and the need for 21st century skills such as planning, organizing, discussing, selecting, reformulating, reflecting, evaluating, etc.

As a result of the activities and techniques implemented in foreign language classes, it was found that there are certain advantages to using creative activities in EFL classes. These include: (i) developing students' divergent thinking skills, memory power, brain processing speed, critical thinking skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills through facilitating active participation and student engagement, insights and conflict resolution; (ii) improving students' concentration through mindfulness and nasal breathing practice; (iii) encouraging an atmosphere of openness; (iv) involving direct and experiential learning; (v) promoting lifelong learning.

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