

An Investigation in to the Impact of Iranian EFL Teachers' Creative Strategy and Learners' Language Improvement

Abolghasem Mirzaee, *M.A in TEFL, Islamic Azad University, Lamerd Branch, fadak917@yahoo.com*

Mohammad Rahimi (Ph.D.), *Professor of TEFL, Islamic Azad University, Lamerd Branch, rahimi175@gmail.com*

Mojtaba Rahmanian, *(Ph.D.), Professor of TEFL, Islamic Azad University, Lamerd Branch, Mojtaba.rahimian@gmail.com*

Abstract

This study aimed to determine if teachers' application of creative strategies within language classrooms would enhance the quality of learning foreign languages. In the first phase, ELTCQ questionnaire was given to a total of 70 teachers, to see whether they use creative strategies or not. In the second phase, a total of 30 intermediate EFL students were randomly assigned to two equal groups of experimental and control. The findings revealed that teachers' creativity and the application of creative techniques in classrooms significantly affect students' language achievement.

Keywords: Creative strategies, Language Improvement, EFL

1-Introduction

"Creativity is a fundamental feature of human intelligence in general. It is grounded in everyday capacities such as the association of ideas, reminding, perception, analogical thinking, searching a structured problem-space, and reflecting self-criticism. It involves not only a cognitive dimension (the generation of new ideas) but also motivation and emotion, and is closely linked to cultural context and personality factors" (Boden 1998, p. 348-352).

Creativity is defined as the act of generating something new and useful in all working areas and educational fields. According to Birdsell's (2013), "creativity has passed across time, transforming from divine inspiration to an 'ah-ha' moment of finding out that this paperclip on my desk could be reshaped into a business card holder" (p. 888). He went on to say that when one term possesses so much meaning and myth along with it, that researchers preferred not to discuss this issue in detail for a long time.

Creativity plays a huge role in all fields especially in language teaching. Teachers must be aware of the tremendous impact it has on the quality of teaching and learning. They can apply creative strategies in their classroom to increase their learners' improvements. Teaching of English language has attracted substantial attention among researchers because it is one the most popular international languages all over the world. Many researchers (Fisher, 2004;

Maley, 1997) surveyed creativity in various contexts. Creativity has also been linked to levels of attainment in second language learning. For example, Maley's (1997) work has raised awareness regarding the significance of creativity through applying texts drawn from a large amount of different literary and non-literary resources, which in turn can be applied to exhibit creative thinking and subsequently to develop the ability to cause creative connections. A wide variety of the language learning tasks such as role-playing and information gap tasks are believed to enhance creativity in learners, especially those including learner-centered and communicative features, and therefore are regarded as appropriate tools for developing creative thinking and behavior within language learners. According to Fisher (2004), creative intelligence appears as a factor promoting the quality of language learning because it leads learners to tackle novel and unpredictable problems. Therefore what role does creativity play in a language classroom? In education, creativity is important because it can foster academic achievement. That said, Fisher (2004, p. 11) reported that:

"It is clear that when students are assessed in ways that recognize and value their creative abilities, their academic performance improves. Creative activity can rekindle the interest of students who have been turned off by school, and teachers who may be turned off by teaching in a culture of control and compliance."

2- Approaches to performing creativity in language classrooms

How teachers can incorporate creativity in their classrooms depends on some factors and situations in which the teaching takes place.

In teaching, students' level is one of the most important elements which should be attentively considered (Bridsell, 2013). Being used to traditional and mechanical methods of teaching, Iranian language learners with elementary language proficiency probably cannot be emotionally-linked to creative teaching of English language. They will not gain the linguistic resources to understand word play in English, or to appreciate a pun or a joke. As the students foster a broader vocabulary and achieve more exposure through texts and recordings, they start to grasp little contrasts between different language structures (Brown, 2007). They start to record the differences in their minds (formal versus informal) and the relationship between the written and spoken word. So teachers should be aware of their students' levels of language proficiency. That said, teachers better apply creativity in advanced levels through using high thinking methods.

The other factor has to do with how students perceive themselves within the real life. The issue which is of great significance is the extent to which teachers can glean relevant information about their students' self-confidence and personality. Are students likely to be extroverts or introverts? Are they risk-takers or not? Creative teachers must be familiar with students' personality traits so that he could apply the appropriate technique in order to enhance students' creative thinking abilities in classroom. To implement creativity, teachers should know about the extent of students' flexibility and ability.

Teachers inclined to adopt creative strategies within language classrooms should consider students' age as well (Maley & Peachy, 2015). Very young learners have generally less inhibition within classrooms, but this changes as students reach puberty. Adult students vary enormously in their willingness to get involved into teaching tasks intending to promote creativity within language classrooms (Maley & Peachy, 2015). Some love discussing freely, reading poetry, acting out scenes, or devising dialogues in class; while others see these activities as a waste of time. As mentioned previously, the acceptance or rejection of such teaching techniques depends on learners' personality types such as extroversion or introversion (Grainger, Barnes, & Scoffham, 2004).

Many researches illustrate that men and women contain different structures, personality types and wiring in their brain, and they also apply their brains in different ways. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and other non-invasive scans of male and female brains indicate that gender has a remarkable function in stress reactions, and may affect memory, emotion, vision, hearing, even how we relax.

The other important factor which should be considered while implementing creative strategies in language classrooms has to do with the character of the students (Dunber, 2004). Their characters are different based on their genetic and the environment in which they grow up (Wilson, 2000). It is important whether they read in their mother tongue or the instruction is held in the target language.

Maley and Peachey (2015) surveyed creativity in classrooms. They maintained that each classroom has its own culture, as does each institution. Some classrooms are almost silent places. The students and the teacher have established working routines that involve little interaction, which culminates in lack of creativity. Other classrooms are replete with energy. Every voice is heard and valued. And some classes are inclined towards 'making' and 'creating' new things. They are involved in creative projects, they use different media to interact with each other in English, and maybe they emphasize self-expression more than accuracy. The latter type of class might be the one in which students become designers, poets, and actors. Maley (2015) points out that:

"an institution's culture depends on a variety of things, particularly its leadership and its history. A school that basically operates as an exam factory is unlikely to value creativity. In contrast, a school that permits great autonomy for its teachers and students may well foster a creative mindset. The examples quoted above, in which teachers brought their hobbies into the classroom, very much depended on the institution allowing them to do this" (p. 19-20).

3-What kinds of creative strategies a teacher can apply in classroom?

The things to be mentioned are just a few ways by which we can engage learners in activities that unlock their creativity, and develop their ability to think creatively.

The first one is the need to develop critical and creative thinking skills which often recognized as a key learning goal in the ELT classroom. A growing body of research

illustrates that both educators and students with diverse learning needs and predispositions benefit from the activation and implementation of higher order thinking skills. In addition, the inclusion of complex cognitive tasks is said to result in more engaging, motivating and stimulating lessons. In view of this, this paper primarily refers to the theory behind incorporating higher order thinking skills in the ELT classroom. Students who exercise critical thinking not only use real life skills of defining, summarizing, retrieving, analyzing, and synthesizing information (Gomez, 2010), but also try to adequately evaluate relevance and reliability of information that they receive from the changing outside world.

In addition, creative teachers can engage learners enjoying moderate to high visual intelligence, in the process of creating concept maps. These students can portray categories and concepts related to language learning. They are able to map concepts and relate their relationships to learn language. Therefore, teachers must identify strong abilities within students and lead them to map the concepts visually.

Also, in order to guide students to manifest their emotions in language classrooms, teachers are advised to start the session in a following way: I like to take the class outside, preferably to a green area, a nearby park or garden. Just getting out of the classroom helps to free up their creative juices. Teachers ask students spend some time concentrating on their senses and making notes about things that they can see, hear, feel or smell. Then we move on to writing essays about they have seen or the issues discussed by teacher during this time.

Moreover, game is one the most joyful activities which learners, particularly kids, enjoy. Teacher can make use of the pleasant activity. While learning a foreign language, language learners can be guided to get involved in the learning process by incorporating games within classroom instruction.

4- Research Question

Does teachers' application of creative strategies affect the quality of learning within language classrooms?

5- Participants and Procedure

To find answer to the research question, a total of 70 Iranian EFL teachers working in different language academies across the city of Lamerd were asked to take part in the study by filling out a creativity questionnaire. They were both male and female. In addition, a total number of 30 Iranian EFL learners voluntarily took part in the study. They were randomly assigned to two groups of 15 (one experimental and one control group). All participants taking part in this study were both male and female, whose age ranged from 19 to 30. All participants taking part in the study were Iranian English learners enjoying intermediate level of proficiency identified by the language academy in which they were studying. In order to determine the students' proficiency level, the institute had used Oxford Placement test, which is regarded as a reliable standardized test. They were selected from a language institute in Lamerd named Parsian Language Academy. They were all native speakers of Persian.

6-Study material

There were two instruments which were used in this study:

First of all, to determine if the treatment would have any impact on learners’ language improvement, a test designed by the language academy (as final exam test) was given to both experimental and control groups. The test was designed using Top Notch 2A textbook. after using a treatment for experimental group, and no treatment for the control group, a posttest was administrated to compare the obtained results of both the experimental and the control groups. Those within the experimental group were taught the intended material using strategies presented by Avilla (2015),which would stimulate their critical thinking abilities and therefore would lead to the improvement of creativity in language classrooms. Avilla (2015) introduced several creative strategies for teachers in order to apply within language classrooms. Some of these strategies are as follows:

Activity 1: Remembering English Grammar and Structures

In this learning task, the language instructor asked the learners to sit in a semi-circle. Each of the learners should say a word, one by one, following the structure of the last word already introduced by the previous student. For instance, Student A said “I”. Subsequently, student B continued with another word following the grammatical structure of the word student A said. Student B mentioned “I went,” because students would already know that a personal pronoun is usually followed by a verb. Student C followed through with the third word: “I went to,”. Consequently, students would remember grammar and structures in the language and they would be listening to their peers.

Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D
I	I went	I went to	I went to Kish

Activity 2: Creating a Fictional Story

In this activity students sat again in a semicircle. In this case, nevertheless, the procedure was more complex since, instead of a word, each student had to say a complete sentence. Students tried to make the emerging story as coherent as possible as can be seen below:

Student A: Reza went to school.

Student B: Reza went to school and he had a bike accident.

Student C: It was very serious; his leg was bleeding (new word).

Student D: He called his mother.

Student E: His mother fainted (new word).

While students created their story, the instructor, as a guide, encouraged them to use the dictionary and helped them along the process. All the learners took part in this task and were quite creative. Students helped one another, participating fully.

Activity 3: Boosting Vocabulary through Screenwriting

Instead of writing essays or short texts, the teacher decided to enhance students' vocabulary as well as to improve their writing skills with screenwriting. According to Argentini (1998), screenwriting is a document that outlines every aural, visual, behavioral, and lingual element required to tell a story. The way students visualize the story they want to write, on the basis of their experience or their imagination, is relevant in the process of obtaining smoothness in writing. With this form of creative writing, Al-Alami (2013) maintains that learners start with the construction of an idea; then the student promotes that idea into actions, dialogue, characters, and scenes. In order to practice screenwriting in the class, the instructor permitted the students to see a movie and then read three scenes of the screenplay. They had to circle unknown vocabulary. They could guess the meaning of new vocabularies they learned since they had previously watched the movie. Pupils learned grammar and the teacher's corrections as well.

7- Results

7-1 Descriptive statistics for the creativity questionnaire

In order to elicit the extent to which Iranian EFL teachers were creative in language classrooms, a creativity questionnaire originally designed by P'Rayan (2011) was utilized. This questionnaire consisted of 30 three-point likert scale items including disagree, agree to a certain extent, and strongly agree. P'Rayan(2011) assigned each of the above mentioned scales a certain value, namely disagree (1 point), agree to a certain extent (3 points), and strongly agree (5 points). By adding up students' responses based on the values presented above, the extent of teachers' creativity in language classrooms was determined. P' Rayan (2011) presented the following measurement framework for determining teachers' degree of creativity in language classrooms:

- 75 Low creativity
- 75-99 Average creativity
- 100-119 Above average creativity
- 120-150 High creativity

Based on this framework, a total of 18 Iranian EFL teachers were identified as having low creativity, while 20 were found to have high creativity. In addition, 32 participants had average potential for being creative in language classrooms. Figure 1 shows the results of descriptive statistics for teachers' creativity.

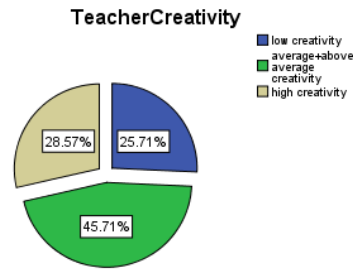


Figure 1: Descriptive statistics for teacher creativity

7-2 The impact of teacher creativity on EFL learners’ language achievement

As mentioned in chapter 1, the second objective of the current study was to examine if teacher creativity would lead to better learning outcome. To this end, 30 EFL students of similar proficiency level within two intact classes (15 experimental group; 15 control group) were asked to take part in the current study. Both classes had the same teacher; however, the teacher was asked to teach the content to students with each of the groups differently. Within the experimental group, the teacher presented the material using learning tasks which increased creativity within the classroom while he was presenting the same material in the control group based on the conventional teaching norms and practices.

As mentioned previously, after it was found that the data is normally distributed within the dependent variable, the researcher used independent sample t-test to check if there was any significant difference between the performance of the students within the experimental and control groups. Table 1 shows the results of the group statistics for the two groups.

Table 1:Group statistics for the experimental and control groups

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest experimental	15	43.7500	3.18899	.82339
control	15	31.6333	4.73952	1.22374

According to Table 1, the total mean for the students’ performance in the experimental group was 43.75 while that of the ones in the control group was 31.63. This shows that students within the experimental group outperformed the ones in the control group with the mean difference of 12.11.

Table 2: The results of independent sample t-test for experimental and control group

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Posttest Equal variances assumed	.792	.381	8.21	28	.000	12.1166	1.47496	9.09534	15.1379
Equal variances not assumed			8.21	24	.000	12.1166	1.47496	9.07591	15.1574

To check if the difference between the two groups was meaningful and not by chance, independent sample t-test was run. As can be seen in Table 2, the difference between the experimental and control group was statistically significant (Sig= .000). This means that the difference between the experimental group is meaningful and not by chance, and if another researcher does the same study in another context, the same finding might be obtained.

8-Conclusion

The following findings can be enumerated for the current study:

- Irrespective of teachers' creativity level, all teachers were very sensitive about punctuality in language classrooms. In addition, they highlighted the significance of checking students' attendance strictly regardless of their degree of creativity.
- Iranian EFL teachers tend to share plenty of similarities in the use of organizing classroom strategies regardless of their level of creativity.
- Students, who were taught by using learning tasks which enhanced creativity, outperformed the ones who were taught by using conventional teaching norms and practices.
- The difference between the experimental and control group was statistically significant; meaning that teachers' creativity is hugely conducive to better learning outcomes.

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