Creativity in EFL teacher training and its transfer to language teaching

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Abstract

There is a growing body of literature that recognizes the importance of creativity. This paper considers the necessity and implications of developing creativity in groups of pre-service teachers. Data for this study were collected using the content analysis - English as foreign language handouts created for the young learners at the elementary school created by two groups of students (primary school pre-service teachers (K1-4) and EFL pre-service English language teachers K5-13). It is my experience of working with those two groups for years that has driven this research that has confirmed our expectations about the ability to create interesting materials for their students with activities that are not ‘traditional’.

Keywords: creativity; self-efficacy; pre-service teacher, creative teaching

1. Introduction

Educational process should create conditions where learners are developed generally, i.e. not only intellectually, but also emotionally, socially etc. There is a large volume of published studies describing the role of creativity in teaching and its benefits. Frequently creativity and education is understood as a fact that teachers should be creative. Authorities claim that creativity can be taught and developed. Thus, it is equally important, not just to teach creatively but also to teach for creativity, to teach learners to see differently, to take risk to do things differently, to

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take decision, to be different. Many creative people who are famous nowadays were rejected at the beginning of their career or even during their life considered (e.g. W. Disney, A. Einstein, El Greco, H. Thoreau, E.A: Poe, Beatles, F. Kafka or Van Gogh).

2. Creativity and creative people

There are many definitions of creativity. It is a widely held view that it is an inherited disposition, but there are many researchers contradicting this opinion or belief. Batey (2012) uses the word capacity to define creativity: „Creativity is the capacity within individuals to develop ideas for the purpose of solving problems and exploiting opportunities“.

He extends this idea and indicates that creativity something we can all learn to use effectively. This idea is supported also by Lehrer (2012) who claims that „Creativity is not a trait that we inherit in our genes or a blessing bestowed by the angels. It's a skill. Anyone can learn to be creative and to get better at it“. Sternberg (2007) in his text Creativity as a habit explains that “creative people are creative largely not by any particular inborn trait, but rather, because of an attitude toward life: They habitually respond to problems in fresh and novel ways, rather than allowing themselves to respond mindlessly and automatically”.

Gardner (2006, 80-81) referring to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi states that “creativity is the occasional emergent from the interaction of three autonomous elements:
- The individual who has mastered some discipline or domain of practice and is steadily issuing variations in that field”
- “The cultural domain in which an individual is working, with its models, prescriptions and proscriptions”.
- The social field – “those individuals and institutions that provide access to relevant educational experience as well as opportunities to perform”.

The issue of intelligence and ways of thinking is frequently discussed. Gardner (2011) concludes that “The key idea in the psychologist’s conception of creativity has been divergent thinking. By standard measures intelligent people are thought of as convergers—people who, given some data or a puzzle, can figure out the correct (or at any rate, the conventional) response. In contrast, when given a stimulus or a puzzle, creative people tend to come up with many different associations, at least some of which are idiosyncratic and possibly unique”. “Divergent thinking “fluency, or the ability to generate a great quantity of ideas; flexibility, or the ability to switch from one perspective to another; and originality in picking unusual associations of ideas. These are the dimensions of thinking that most creativity tests measure and that most workshops try to enhance (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Hudsson (1999) describes divergent thinking tasks and abstractions as a creativity booster

According to Amabile (1998) creativity arises from the confluence of expertise (knowledge), creative-thinking skills, and motivation (especially intrinsic m.). She uses the term creative thinking to explain creativity. NACCCE (1999) stresses that not all creative thinking involves problem solving, but rather finding problems one hadn’t imagined and leads on to new horizons. Sternberg (2004) warns that knowledge can challenge but also impede creativity. He (ibid) claims that “One cannot go beyond what is known without knowing it. … Experts can become entrenched in ways seeing things and lose sight of other perspectives”.

Sternberg (1985) in his triarchic theory defines three types of intelligence that are key for creativity. Synthetic (creative) intelligence – people with prevailing synthetic type of intelligence are good at generating ideas that are novel, they are able to redefine problems and to think insightfully. There are two categories of creative intelligence: novelty (how a person reacts to new situation) and automatization (how a person reacts in repeated situations). People with analytical thinking have an ability to judge the value of ideas, to assess their strengths and weaknesses and suggest how to improve them. The third type is the practical and it is connected to the ability to thrive in the real world.

Sternberg (2007) in his theory that creativity is a habit describes that creative people habitually (a) look for ways to see problems that other people don’t look for, (b) take risks that other people are afraid to take, (c) have the courage to defy the crowd and to stand up for their own beliefs, and (d) seek to overcome obstacles and challenges to their views that other people give in to, among other things”.

Gardner (2011) defines creative person as somebody “who regularly solves problems, fashions products, or defines new questions in a domain in a way that is initially considered novel but that ultimately becomes accepted in a particular cultural setting”. As we can see all definitions deal with novelty, innovation and Gardner adds the
acceptance in particular culture. The same can be found in Csikszentmihalyi’s works, e.g. “Generally, creative people are thought to be rebellious and independent. Yet it is impossible to be creative without having first internalized a domain of culture” (1997).

Sternberg and Lubart (1991, 1993) apply confluence approach to understanding creativity and introduced the investment theory of creativity and defined six resource that confluence creativity, namely intellectual abilities (mentioned above), knowledge, styles of thinking, personality and environment.

Ali Taha and Tej (2014) discuss the barriers in creativity and they summarise them to point out and stress the necessity of their understanding to develop it.

3. Creativity in education

Miller (2013) sees creativity as a capacity that “fosters deeper learning, builds confidence and creates a student ready for college and career”. Much of the available literature on creativity deals with the question of implementing creativity in teaching. National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education recommended developing practical programmes for promoting creative thinking in primary and secondary schools. Minova (2013) states there is a difference between child creativity and adult creativity. The fact children might create products that are not useful does not mean they are not creative. She claims that the pre-primary school period is the most suitable.

“Highly creative people in any field are often driven by a strong self-belief in their abilities in that field. Having a positive self-image as a creative person can be fundamental to developing creative performance” (NACCE, 103-104). Pajares (2002) states that “Teacher self-efficacy has become an important construct in teacher education, and teacher educators should continue to explore how these beliefs develop, what factors contribute to strong and positive teaching efficacy beliefs in varied domains, and how teacher education programs can help pre-service teachers develop high teacher self-efficacy.” High self-efficacy results in selecting more difficult task, high level of employment and involvement, and good emotional attitude. On the other hand teachers with low sense of efficacy are frequently described as those who emphasize rigid control of classroom behavior, and rely on extrinsic inducements and negative sanctions to get students to study (see Pajares, 2002). Self-efficacy is associated also with self-reflection what is a one of the steps to self-development. Gardner (2011) suggests that “Creative individuals spend a considerable amount of time reflecting on what they are trying to accomplish, whether or not they are achieving success (and, if not, what they might do differently)”.

NACCCE (1999) in their report make distinction between teaching creatively and teaching for creativity. “By teaching creatively we mean teachers using imaginative approaches to make learning more interesting, exciting and effective. Teachers can be highly creative in developing materials and approaches that fire children’s interests and motivate their learning. This is a necessary part of all good teaching”. “By teaching for creativity we mean forms of teaching that are intended to develop young people’s own creative thinking or behaviour”.

Portik reports the results of his research and states that schooling is an important borderline in child’s development and frequently it brings a sharp fall in the creativity growth since children are being taught to keep to the given rules, to optimize their outputs to meet the desirable and measurable criteria.

Creative learners need creative teachers. Strakova (2013) confirms the significance of teacher and points out that cognitive development of pupils is significantly influenced by adults in their environment regardless it is in preschool age or even later at school. Rinkevich (2011, p. 220) highlights that “increasing creativity in teaching begins with teacher education.” It is a necessity to introduce courses of creativity at teacher training programmes that would focus also on how to develop a creative student and student-centered teaching rather than teacher centered teaching. Makel (2009, In: Rinkevich, 2011, p. 220) termed „discrepancy between the perceived value of creativity and its absence in schools the “creativity gap,” and research indicates many reasons as to why this is a common occurrence.”

Petrowski (in Horng et al, 2005) postulated three main principles for constructing creative learning environment: (1) offer the possibilities to choose or create; (2) support any attempt to create; (3) implement sophisticated management strategies.
Strakova (2012) in her research found that “Teachers frequently display a kind of resignation and give up searching for their own ideas, as everything is ready for them, planned, poised –without the need to spend much time on thinking about what is beyond one’s teaching”.

Fisher (2006) suggests few ideas how to develop creative thinking in young learners and claims that “children who are encouraged to think creatively show increased levels of motivation and self-esteem.” He suggests including opportunities for creativity in the lessons one teaches:

- using imagination
- generating questions, ideas and outcomes
- experimenting with alternatives
- being original
- expanding on what they know or say
- exercising their judgment.

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) states that it is impossible to enjoy “the same activity over and over, unless you discover new challenges, new opportunities in it. Otherwise it becomes boring”.

Puchta and Williams (2012) who deal with English language teaching enumerate the following “13 categories of activity that help with both the development of the learners’ thinking skills and their language”: Making comparisons, Categorising, Sequencing, Focusing attention, Memorising, Exploring space, Exploring time, Exploring numbers, Creating associations, Analysing cause and effect, Making decisions, Solving problems, Creative thinking.

We can also mention Thammineni (2012) who enumerates several innovative activities that can be practiced in English classroom:

- Task-based activities
- Contests
- Language games
- Video or movie sharing
- Media literacy
- Translation
- Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) programs.

“Lack of teacher training in creativity has also been identified in the research as a reason why more teachers do not employ creative activities in the classroom (Fleith 2000; Kim 2008). Authors stress the need for more creativity training in teacher preparation programs, which serves as a likely starting point for creative teaching.” (Rinkevich, 2011, p. 220).

4. Objective and Method

Benedek (2014) summarises that creativity is defined by novelty and usefulness and claims that this also applies to “the definition of individual differences in creativity, thus, referring to creativity as the ability to produce ideas that are novel and useful”. Study of creation in designing tasks for learner (3rd - 4th grade) to practice English as a foreign language by the pre-service English language teachers was the main objective used in our research. The aim was to compare two different groups and their intuitive use of creativity in preparing their own handouts to ready-made material.

The qualitative data analysis was used to compare creativity of the two groups of students. In-vivo coding was used to perform the document analysis. As QDA is a non-linear process during the realization of our research we noticed or realized that students in their handouts used “activities that challenge creativity. Thus, we also conducted the pilot study in type of tasks in a scope of teaching for creativity.

5. Sample

Research participants were 57 (5 males and 52 female) students from a medium size university in Slovakia (University of Presov). With an average 23 years the students ranged from 21 to 24. Among them there were 11 students studying primary school teacher training (Faculty of Education) and 46 students studying English language
teacher training (in combination with other major). The sample was divided into two groups with different educational background and curriculum. They are studying to teach different age groups, however their fields are partly crossed. Group A were pre-service elementary teachers gain the diploma that qualifies them to teach 6 – 11 years old pupils (K1-4). They teach all subjects and can teach foreign languages as well. Usually their preparation for English language teaching consists of Basics of (foreign language) linguistics, Children literature, Methodology and Language preparation (it forms 1/7 of their study). Group B were pre-service double—major students who are trained to teach 10-20 years old students (K5-13) but frequently teach pupils older than 8 years. Concerning curriculum approximately 1/3 of their course are English language subjects focusing on Language development, Linguistics, Culture, History, Literature and Methodology.

6. Data Collection and Analysis

The graded readers for 3rd - 4th graders (elementary school) were given to all participants who were asked to create the handouts (consisting of at least 3 tasks) to check reading comprehension. They were given the template. All students had already realized teaching practice at elementary school and passed the compulsory courses on teaching English language. They were given a blank template with an orange decorative margin and task numbers (white numbers in orange circles) what might have inspired or partly influenced them to think carefully about the target and to challenge them to use different fonts, to add pictures, to draw their own illustrations. Participants had 5 weeks to deliver the handouts. Participants in group A had to create 3 different handouts to 3 different books. Group A had the same task but they had to create 1 book for the same target group (3rd-4th grades) as participants in group A and 2 books for older students. The handouts that were compared were only those prepared for the group of 8-10 years old children, i.e. we had 79 handouts in total with 237 tasks. The tasks types were counted after finding the same and similar ones (Fill in the missing letter vs Write a missing letter etc.). Students created 47 different task types. Matching was the most frequent type of activity 36 times, i.e. 15,9% . Write the missing letter (17 times) and Scrambled letters (15times) were the task types that followed. In the next step we created broader groups combining similar tasks together (e.g. Fill in the missing letter – for the total beginners to practice spelling, fill in the missing word and write few sentences). It was quite surprising that matching activities (49 cases) and writing activities (29 cases) were followed by puzzles and crosswords (27 cases). We expected that drawing/colouring (15 cases) would be one of the most frequent activity as it is still typical for children at that age and drawing and colouring is one of the possibilities how to check understanding in a reproductive period of foreign language learning.

Out of the total number (237) 11 tasks were selected as different (not unknown in the foreign language teaching or teaching at the primary school, still promising the ability of pre-service teachers to prepare teaching materials creatively).

The tasks Find and draw missing picture that follows logically and Odd one out combine language skills and logical thinking.

The activity Draw a line between the trees (two trees in the handout). Hang your clothes there: skirt, sweater, T-shirt and shorts was motivating. Children have to understand the task, it checks understanding vocabulary and they can draw the answer and be original.

There were five activities with the aim to correct the mistakes in the words. They were mostly similar, the regular text with the mistakes and spec/lines for writing the correct version. A picture of snail with the house drawn as a spiral from the repeated word snail with two spelling mistakes was quite interesting. This forces the learner to read the word several times until he/she spots the mistake.

Another activity combining logical thinking and language skills is Try to find some connection or relation between the words. e.g. a river + a fountain= WATER. The answers can be different as this is also based on the associations and pupils’ imagination and creativity.

Participant created 5 different board or card games. Connect clothes with body parts activity was methodologically well created as there were no directly pictures to be matched with the words but children have to understand the word (the elicitation cannot be applied) t be able to match it with the part of a body (level of difficulty).
One of the participants changed the border (margin) of the handout. S/he changed the orange decoration to apples and leaves as the topic of a book was autumn.

Another unexpected “design” difference was the one done by a student who instead of regular lines indicated number of letters in the activity Write who/what is in the picture used the circles in different shapes. It is just a slight change but children at that age like “funny and jolly shapes”, fonts, pictures.

Out of 11 tasks that were labelled as “different” or “creative” there were 3 created by the pre-service primary school teachers and the rest (8) by pre-service English language teachers.

7. Results and Discussion

The result was unexpected. We hypothesized (based on our prior knowledge and previous experience) that pre-service primary education teachers would be far more creative than pre-service English language teachers. We have to underline that the groups were unequal and it is difficult to compare 11 and 46 students in case that every pre-service primary school teacher prepared 3 handouts while group B just one. Thus, if we compare the number of activities 3 out of 33 (9,1%) in group A and 8 out of 138 ( comparison is 5,7%); but if we compare people (presuming that each task was created by different student) that the ratio is different – 3 out of 11 (27,3%) in group A and 8 out of 46 (17,4%). Still the results indicate that students studying at the Faculty of Education are more creative than students studying English language as their major. We studied their curricula, none of those groups has a possibility to study course on Creativity neither as a compulsory course, nor as elective one. However, pre-service primary education teachers have also other methodology courses (mother tongue, mathematics, arts, music, science, physical education, technical skills etc.). Their knowledge and practical skills is transferred to their own teaching. Knowing their students well was evident from the tasks, instructions and integration of other subjects’ prior knowledge into their activities. They also have subjects Creative writing and Critical thinking and we believe that especially the last one has a significant influence on students’ approach to teaching. Realizing the strength of critical thinking in personal development by their own experience, we believe is transferred to pre-service teacher’s beliefs. In comparison with B group, their language skills (especially stylistics) need more practice. B group, on the other hand used inappropriate language, and design that is appropriate more for older students. They themselves admitted they do not feel confident in groups of young learners and have problems to adjust their own language and tasks to pupils language proficiency level and cognitive development.

We indicated that coding the tasks lead us to further study of materials from the perspective – “activities that challenge creativity”. Similarly, as in case of creativity, more open ended tasks and tasks challenging pupils’ creativity can be found in the pre-service primary education teachers.

8. Conclusion

Creativity (connected with novelty and usefulness) is undoubtedly important in our life. Coming out of a box, breaking the routines and paths enable us to see things differently and it may lead to new, more effective, different, more aesthetic, maybe more modern solutions. Creativity is not connected with arts exclusively and it is important to challenge people to think creatively and to accept differences. We need to open minds and to start with it as soon as possible (or not to close/block the minds?). Thus, it is necessary to start in pre-service teacher education and introduce courses on Critical thinking, Creative thinking and Teaching for creativity for all pre-service teachers as a compulsory course.

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