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Are Creative EFL Teachers Born or Can They Be Grown? Some Reflections and Implications for Teacher Training

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ABSTRACT

Foreign language teacher creativity covers a variety of meanings. It refers to teacher creativity as a language learner/ user; teacher creativity as a performer (i.e. a person acting out in a classroom) and teacher creativity as a manager of his/her own professional development/ career. The paper describes the training implemented to novice teachers of English (n= 40). The aim was to raise students' awareness of the concept of creativity, with special emphasis being put on FL teacher creativity and to familiarize the trainees with creativity enhancement procedures. The training affected students both cognitively and emotionally. It proved particularly useful in broadening student's perspectives upon the notion of creativity and triggering their reflection upon what makes foreign language teacher behaviour creative.

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Keywords:
teacher creativity, foreign language teacher education, originality, divergent thinking tests, problem- solving

Introduction: Why Creativity?

Creativity is often defined as an ability to generate solutions, ideas, conceptualizations, artistic forms, theories or products that are unique and novel (Reber, 1995: 172). Creativity is defined as a puzzle, a paradox or a mystery, because the ideas are generated unexpectedly with little or no conscious awareness of how they arouse (Boden, 1996: 75). It is often associated with imagination, originality, discovery, innovation and invention. However, in Runco's opinion (2007: 410), these terms are not synonymous. The researchers (Child, 2007; Dörnyei, 2005; Sternberg and Lubart 1999) discuss two dimensions of the concept, namely: the characteristics of the geniuses, including the property of people with exceptional talents and original, fresh and innovative ideas within a particular field. The second dimension is commonly associated with divergent thinking, which in turn, is characterized by a process of 'moving away' in various directions. It is connected with diverging of ideas to encompass a variety of relevant aspects and often brings novel ideas and solutions (Reber, 1995: 796). Sternberg & Lubart (1999: 3) refer to these dimensions as productive (or creative) giftedness and reproductive ability, respectively. Their definition focuses on the quality of the generated ideas as well as their applicability or practicality. For them, creativity denotes the ability to produce work that is both novel (i.e. original, unexpected) and appropriate (i.e. useful, adaptive concerning task constraints) (Sternberg & Lubart, 1999: 3). A similar point of view is shared by Richards (1999, cited by Doyle 2011: 5). In contrast, for Csikszentmihalyi (1996) "Big C" creativity and "Little c". According to Starko (2009: 10), creativity with "Big C" changes the disciplines, whereas creativity with "Little c" adds some innovations to everyday life.

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Bleakley's typology (Bleakley, 2004: 463, cited by Cumming, 2011) focuses on 10 types of creativity: 'an ordering process', 'rhythm and cycle'; 'originality and spontaneity', 'the irrational'; 'problem-solving'; 'problem-stating'; 'inspiration'; 'serendipity'; 'resistance to the uncreative' and 'withdrawal and absence'. All of them in a sense capture the nature of creativity.

As 2009 was proclaimed by the Council of Europe as the European Year of Creativity and Innovation (http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/language-teaching/doc34_en.html, 25.10.2009), the very concept of creativity has been revisited for a variety of reasons. The initiative of Council of Europe was one of many that aimed at highlighting the links between language and creativity. Creativity, however, can be also discussed from learner's and teacher's perspectives. Cumming (2011) summarizes the idea nicely, saying that to think critically, learn creatively and to generate solutions and creative ideas is not highly prized but essential in contemporary world. Up to now, various workshops and seminars have been organized to promote creativity and creative thinking.

Creativity is central to language learning and language teaching. In Cumming's opinion (2011), creativity, learning and teaching are fundamental, interdisciplinary issues. Within education, creativity is usually associated with innovation, synthesis and making connections in the process of learning and teaching (Cumming, 2011). At the same time, creative strategies exercised in the process of language learning and communication can be successfully transferred to other areas of human life. Creativity also seems indispensable to our learning. It is often said that language and creativity are mental faculties which form part of the natural skills of human beings. Additionally, creativity promotes active noticing, i.e. directs our attention to what we will and will not be conscious of (Starbuck, 2006: 4- 5). Starbuck provides the following explanation:

> logic and creativity are the two main principles that determine how our brain works. Right- brain, creative, activities involve anything that taps into imagination, imagery, rhythm and rhyme. (…) Conversely anything that is text-based, or involves ordering and sequencing is left-brain. Solving simple maths puzzle, making a flow diagram and simple reading from the textbook are left-brain activities.
>
> (Starbuck, 2006: 4- 5)

And finally, there is a strong correlation between creativity and teaching a language. Foreign language teacher creativity covers a variety of meanings. It refers to teacher creativity as a language learner/ user; teacher creativity as a performer (i.e. a person acting out in a classroom) and teacher creativity as a manager of his/her own professional development/ career. Thus, looking at the last two meanings of the term, we may risk a statement that creativity facilitates the incubation period (i.e. the entering into the profession) and prevents teachers from burn-out. Woodwards (2010) discusses various professional cycles of teachers, so we may say that creativity helps teachers in "Survival and discovery stage", it enlivens "Stabilization and experimentation stages" and delays "Stagnation stage".

Cultivating the Creative Spirit

Recent tendencies in the research focus on creativity as a skill that can be developed. The creative process can be conceived of as a form of problem-defining and problem-solving.

Jeffrey and Craft (2004) made a distinction between 'teaching creatively' and 'teaching for creativity'. The former refers to the process of using innovative and imaginative approaches to make learning more interesting and effective. The latter is used in reference to promoting students creative thinking and behaviour.

Runco (2007: 2) says that there are bridges between basic cognitive processes (e.g. attention, perception, memory, information processing) and creative problem solving as well as connections with intelligence, problem solving, language and other indications of individual differences. Csikszentmihalyi (1999) enumerates three issues, namely: divergent thinking, problem solving and motivation as important in this context. The paradox of creativity is that in order to think creatively we need to be stimulated by the thinking of others (Fisher, 1990: 93 in Cortazzi & Jin, 2005).

Creativity is often regarded to be the other side of critical thinking. Creativity helps to generate ideas, whereas critical thinking skills enable to evaluate and implement these ideas into practice. as wise evaluation, in critical thinking. Creativity without critical thinking may lead to converting questionable ideas into unwise action {Ennis, quoted in Rusbult, 2001).

Torrance (1996a, 1990, cited after Zeng et al., 2011) claims that creative thinking can be cultivated by a number of tasks that require verbal or pictorial transformations. Tasks that require verbal manipulations include the following: .

- Asking questions – asking questions to know for sure what is happening in the drawing
- Guessing causes – giving possible causes that lead to the action shown in the drawing
- Guessing consequence – listing possible consequences resulting from the action in the drawing
- Product improvement – listing the cleverest, most interesting and unusual ways of changing a given object
- Unusual uses – Thinking and enumerating all the possible uses of the object
- Unusual questions – Proposing original questions about a particular object
- Just suppose – Listing things that would happen in an improbable situation (e.g. clouds had strings attached to them which hang down to earth).

Creativity enhancement procedures that require pictorial transformation include the following:

- Picture construction – drawing a picture from a blot or a given tear drop
- Picture completion – adding lines to incomplete figures and give titles for the drawings

Parallel lines – making picture from pairs of straight lines and entitle the drawings (Torrance 1966a, 1966b, cited after Zeng et al., 2011).

Method

EFL Teacher Creativity Training - Background Information

The creative thinking process refers to the sequence of cognitive activities that can lead to novel, yet appropriate, productions in a given problem context (Lubart, 2000- 2001). The creative process can be conceived of as a form of problem-defining and problem-solving. The abstract term 'problem' refers to any goal an individual/team seeks to achieve, such as developing innovative products/services for a target market (Lubart, 2000-2001; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2000- 2001, cited by Zeng et al., 2011: 27). The process refers to the sequence of cognitive activities that can lead to novel, yet appropriate, productions in a given problem context (Lubart, 2000- 2001). This, in turn, seems to address the needs and characteristics of novice teachers who frequently fail to find the balance between creative and critical thinking.

Inexperienced teachers are characterized by the enthusiasm, the need for novelty and their interest in delivering motivating and fascinating lessons, often at the expense of routine and practice. Novice teachers are also said to concentrate mostly on two things: unexpected students behaviour and maintaining the flow of activity in the classroom (Johnson, 1999 quoted in Borg, 2006: 58). At the same time, inexperienced teachers are sensitive about how they are perceived by others.

The training carried our among the group of novice teachers was initiated to help them enter the teaching profession and provide them with thought provoking ideas. The study was also based on the assumption that people can become more creative if they are trained to effectively apply appropriate metacognitive strategies to stimulate their creativity (Kilgour, 2006; Kurtzberg & Amabile, 2000-2001). The detailed aims of the study are as follows:

- to raise students' awareness of the concept of creativity, with special emphasis being put on FL teacher creativity.
- to expose students to the examples of creative teachers' behaviours and help them to verbalize what they understand by creative FL behaviour (to promote the awareness of professional practice).
- to trigger reflection upon students' own attitudes towards creativity and their perception of it, and indirectly help them develop their professional identity.
- to familiarize students with some idea- generation techniques and creativity enhancement procedures that can be later implemented in their teaching practice.

Participants

40 students of English, aged 23- 24, took part in the training. The trainees were mostly females (38) with two males. They specialized in English language teaching. So far they had completed the BA programme, which gave basic qualifications in teaching. Teacher training standards in Poland (obtained during BA programme) include the following characteristics:

- Specialization in two subjects (in this particular study: English and German)
- Pedagogical training (the overall course - 360 h, including the following courses: language pedagogy, methodology of ELT, SLA theory, psychology)
- Practical training (180 h – observation and teaching under the supervision of others)
- ICT competence
- Command of a foreign language (B2, B2+) (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages)

All of the subjects were attending MA programme at English Philology Department (University of Silesia, Poland). During that programme the subjects extended the knowledge gained at BA level by attending some theoretical classes in ELT methodology, psycholinguistics and SLA research methods. Additionally, they participated in teaching practices (30 hours of teaching).

Some of the subjects had limited experience of teaching, which was mostly based on private tutorials and part- time job at public or private language schools as novice teachers. At the moment of the training, the students were completing their final semester of MA programme. Thus, the training also aimed at providing the trainees with some procedures they could transfer to English teaching or apply for professional development.

Procedure

The training proper lasted 6 months (research period: December 2009 – May 2010). The training sessions tackled various aspects of creativity and were spread evenly within this time period. The exact characteristics as well as the results of the sessions are presented in the subsequent subchapters.

Findings

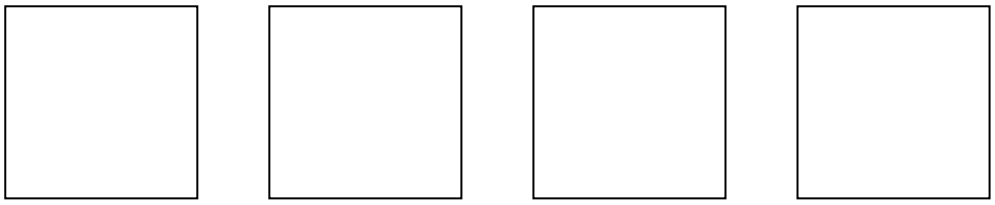
Characteristics of the Training Sessions

To develop teacher trainees creativity various creativity tests were implemented. In general, creativity tests serve as catalyst for ideas and solutions, which are later thoroughly selected and analysed as the number of the generated ideas itself is not only important. The results are interpreted according to three basic types of score, namely fluency, flexibility and originality. A fluency score is obtained by counting the number of responses given. However, those which are accidental or nonsensical are excluded. The second, flexibility, measures the variety of responses given. A third measure is originality and is derived form the

most infrequent responses. By counting the number of times a response occurs within the group under test, it is possible to arrive at a frequency distribution for each response and to allot scores for the least frequent (Child, 2007: 332, Dörnyei, 2005: 206).

First session – a lecture preceded by some divergent tests. First session was devoted to some theoretical training into the concept of creativity and its role in EFL. The main objective of this session was to familiarize the students with some definitions of creativity, research tradition, stages of the creative cycle. Theoretical lecture included the examples of problem-solving tasks, divergent tests and other creativity-enhancement procedures. The session started with some divergent tests, which were commented upon and evaluated by the trainees at the end of it. Detailed characteristics of the tests is presented below:

1. 'Squares' test – one of the commonest tests (based on Guilford 1959, in Child, 2007: 332- 333). Runco (2010) redefined personal creativity as the process by which some aspect of experience is intentionally transformed. (Doyle, 2011: 52). The aim is to brainstorm students' ideas on the cue provided (here a square).



'Squares' test turned out to be the most problematic for the trainees who, at first, did not fully grasp the idea of it. The feelings of surprise and confusion accompanied the students. In the course of the task, however, these feelings were gradually replaced by fun, enjoyment and engagement as the test involved both verbal and non-verbal skills (drawing). As far as the scores are concerned, fluency was relatively high, i.e. 15 examples– maximum with average number of responses being 9-10. However, flexibility can be described as low, the examples provided mostly depicted letters of alphabet. The same is true about originality. The range of examples was rather low, the students generated typical objects rather than infrequent ones; e.g.: a house, a wagon, a box, a cup of tea, a train.

2. Uses of objects – the object selected was cabbage, however the choice of the object for this task is optional (based on Guilford, 1959; in Child, 2007: 332- 333). The aim was to brainstorm the examples of the situations in which a cabbage can be used.

The 'Uses of objects' test proved to be the easiest and the funniest of all the tests applied to the trainees in this session. The test evoked a lot of positive responses and promoted interaction among students, who shared and commented upon the generated ideas. When comes to the scores, fluency was high, i.e. the number of examples ranged from 17 to 48 uses altogether, with the average being 22. The other two, namely flexibility and originality, were also high. Some unusual examples provided concern the following objects: a bra, a boat (leaves of cabbage), a ball, a pillar/ a post to fix memos, a chair, a stepper, a replace for a rope. Interesting is the fact that those students who enumerated the highest number of uses, justified their creativity, saying:

- *"I 'm working with children, I have to be creative."*
- *"I've been teaching for 4 years now. I have to be creative."*

3. The third (final) test applied in this session was 'Consequences test' (based on Guilford, 1959; in Child, 2007: 332- 333). It aimed at presenting students with an imaginary situation and eliciting students' responses to this situation. The change of this particular situation was: we all have four fingers and no thumb on each hand.

The trainees perceived the 'Consequences test' as something bizarre. At first, they were puzzled and confused both by the nature of the problem and uniqness of the situation depicted. They needed a couple of minutes to think the situation over. As they got engrossed in the activity, they gradually became interested in the problem. They started to exchange ideas and comments about the situation. Some non-verbal responses were also quite frequent, e.g. miming certain gestures/ actions to find out if they could be performed without thumbs. However, fluency score was rather low. The subjects provided 7 examples max. with the average concerning 3. The same is true about flexibility, which was also low. Contrary to that, originality was relatively high.

Second session – video presentation preceded by a verbal association task. Second session, entitled „6 things beginning with R" (Thornbury, 2008), aimed at eliciting students' verbal associations of things that started with a letter "R" and related to teaching. Indirectly, the task intended to verify the problems/ issues that the trainees perceived as important for their profession.

The session began with the verbal association task, which was followed by watching the movie under the same title (Scott Thornbury's presentation). The session finished with a short discussion upon the ideas generated by the students which were contrasted with those provided by Scott Thornbury (2008).

Tablo 1. A comparison of Thornbury's suggestions and the subjects' responses.

6 things beginning with R	6 things beginning with R
• Thornbury's examples:	• The trainees' examples:
• Routine • Reading • Repetition • Register • Reference • Rote learning	• Reflection • Risk- taking • Research • Response/ reaction • Revision • Reading

The task was welcome by the trainees, who often generated more examples than necessary. Thus, fluency can be described as high, quite the same as flexibility (also high; max. 24 various examples; the average number was 6). Originality of the ideas seems to be quite high as well. Some examples of the responses included the following: relaxing, re-examining, rejoicing, rethinking, reinforcement, reaction.

Looking at the students' responses, we may come to the conclusion that to a certain degree they reflect the students' current way of thinking and a number of tasks the trainees have to handle, namely: combining work, studies and doing their own research projects. It seems that the trainees have to cope with a variety of issues at the same time, i.e. they have to serve as observers, researchers, and first of all, teachers who want to establish their professional identity.

Another interesting comment that can be drawn concerns the very reaction of the students towards the outcomes of this task. The students showed the need to verify and confirm the answers (for example: the students shouted on every occasion when they had the same associations as those given by Thornbury). This may indicate that the trainees were either not ready to accept their own responses or displayed a slight misunderstanding of the purpose of the task.

Third and fourth sessions – FL teacher creative behaviour: examples of good practice. Third and fourth sessions focused on questions for reflection and video- watching (Adrian Underhill, 2008: „Successful Pronunciation Learning"). This was followed by a discussion and ideas- sharing about Ss' impressions of the film and Underhill's behaviour. The aims were as follows:

- to raise Ss' awareness of a different approach to pronunciation learning, which is described by Underhill as both a mental and a physical activity;
- to provoke Ss' thinking about their own willingness to 'think out of the box'.

Before video watching, the students were requested to think about teacher's behaviour they would describe as creative. They were also asked to recall their own teachers and find some characteristics common to creative teachers. Later on, they were exposed to the video. Their task was to pay attention to Underhill's behaviour. The sessions were followed by a whole class discussion. The students were astonished by the content of the video, i.e. Underhill's style of presentation and his approach to pronunciation instruction. They described the behaviour of the presenter as exaggerated, unusual or even strange. They themselves would not dare to act similarly during their own lessons. However, they agreed that such a behaviour is allowed with a charismatic teacher, otherwise it may be regarded as unnatural.

Fifth and sixth sessions – scenarios of creative lessons, Ss' self-reports. The next, fifth session, was related to the concept of foreign language teacher creativity. The following aims can be enumerated:

- to share ideas about the role of creativity in FLL,
- to provide examples of good practices, situations that required teacher creativity and scenarios of creative lessons,
- to generate possible obstacles for creativity.

All of the trainees shared the scenarios of creative lessons. The most frequent examples concerned the use of technology, authentic materials, meaningful activities, various games or visual materials, which the trainees tried to implement irrespective of whether it was recommended by the course book or not. It seems that creativity for them is often associated with novelty, individual's modification of the initial plans, implementation of some alternative solutions or improvisation. What strikes is the personal relevance attached to their scenarios and the trainees' individual contribution. The outcomes corresponds to the features characteristic of creative teaching, namely: innovation, ownership, control and relevance, which are enumerated by Woods (1990, cited by Jeffrey and Craft, 2004: 79). The data also indicate that teacher's creative thinking is a cyclical process, determined by teacher's self- knowledge, self- direction, reflection and autonomy. It develops from the identification and recognition of creative features in one's behaviour and gradually expands to generate, modify and evaluate one's creative behaviour (for details see Wysocka, 2011).

Final session concerned students' self –reporting. The aims of this session were:

- to allow Ss to verbalize their own definitions of FL teacher creativity and experiences with introducing creativity;
- to evaluate the training.

The students' feedback together with the evaluation is discussed in the subsequent section.

Conclusions

If we pose the question: 'Are creative teachers born or can they be grown', the answer would be both ways. Some teachers are born with all the predispositions to teach creatively. However, current research indicates that teaching for creativity is essential and worth the effort (Faccione, 2007; Jeffrey and Craft, 2004; Starbuck, 2006; Wysocka, 2011). Before the training, the students perceived creativity, mainly as a trait characteristics, a cognitive predisposition, typical of artists, exceptionally gifted and talented people. They shared the view that one is either lucky to be born creative or not.

After the training, the subjects more often than not subscribed to the view that creativity is a skill or a feature of character that can be developed. Some selected subjects' opinions illustrating this point are presented below:

- *„Creativity is a skill, an ability that some teachers are born with and others have to learn*."
- *„Creativity is like muscles that have to be used to be strong*."
- *„Creativity is teacher specific and individual based, i.e. teachers differ much in their level of creativity. It may result from the teacher's personal attitude towards the concept of <'creativity>".*

At the end of the training, the students were also more precise about defining the concept and suggesting the features of a creative teacher. They enumerated as many as 30 categories. The profile of a creative teacher included some stable predispositions as well as some practical, minor or situation specific features. The most frequent examples are presented below:

- Innovative, original (*„Teachers act as creators for all the time whey they are in the classroom. They create the learners' knowledge of the language and about the language"*),
- Open- minded (*„A creative teacher walks away from used clichés and schematic patterns"*),
- Flexible, skillful in reorganizing and reconstructing the lesson, material, etc.,
- Sensitive and flexible in adjusting teaching styles to a particular group of students,
- Unpredictable, spontaneous, willing to improvise,
- Not afraid (of challenges, new methods and technologies, students).

As far as the definition of creativity is concerned, the teacher trainees entered the training with a restricted, narrow view of creativity. They displayed difficulty in verbalizing what creativity means and what behaviour it can be associated with. The period of the training contributed to a slight change in the subjects' opinions. They started to perceive creativity as a complex phenomenon and a multidimensional concept. Creativity was defined by them as an ability, a skill, an attitude, a reaction or an approach to particular tasks. Additionally, in the subjects' opinions, creativity could be manifested in a variety of ways, namely: in the application of the materials or in the reactions to what is happening in the classroom. For the trainees, creative teaching is connected with being continuously passionate in planning and conducting a lesson as well as adding a variety to daily routines rather than applying extremely innovative activities occasionally. Creativity concerns not only task or material preparation but also the way teachers approach their students. What also matters is how the teachers are perceived by the class. The subjects believed that creativity is noticeable in every detail.

Below responses best summarize the teacher students' views:

- *„Creativity means discovery, imagination and invention. It requires skills in using the tools of the trade and associating thoughts and feelings in unusual combinations. It is also an attitude of playfulness, openness and flexibility."*

- *„Creativity involves being an explorer, adventurer and even entertainer to a certain degree. It also implies getting away from the already established track and offers open-mindedness to experience, exploration, innovation, experimentation and innovation as far as FL teaching is concerned."*

- *„A phenomenon of many dimensions: creative material preparation and use, creative lesson planning, creative reactions and adjustment of the course of a lesson to a changing situation and creative use of techniques."*

Another point worth commenting upon relates to emotions and knowledge. In the initial stage of the training, the subjects displayed very low knowledge about the concept of creativity and the techniques used to enhance creativity. They also did not think overtly about the link between creativity and language teaching. The feelings of: surprise, disbelief, suspicion, shock, confusion, puzzlement accompanied the trainees as they approached the tasks or listened to some verbal presentation. Gradually, as the training progressed, these feelings were replaced by those of positive attitude, gradual interest and involvement, curiosity, enjoyment and fun. At the end of the training, the subjects showed interest in the concept of creativity, sensitivity to various teacher behaviours and situations. They could also see the application of some creativity enhancement procedures to language presentation and practice.

The trainees participating in the study frequently reported the following difficulties while responding to creative tasks: worry or inability to fix their attention on the problem; fear of thinking 'out of the box'. At the beginning of the training they were very reserved, not to say sceptic. They refrained themselves from playing with new ideas and materials, as if they waited for some support. It took them some time to generate various ideas and share them with their colleagues. What was also observed was the subjects' tendency for 'outsider perspective' rather than 'insider one'. The scenarios offered by the subjects sometimes resemble the list of techniques perceived by them as attractive and motivating. The scenarios often lacked details and personal evaluations.

Some positive outcomes of the training can be summarized in the following way:

- Interest in and better knowledge of what makes creative teacher and what makes a lesson creative,
- A trigger for generating ideas and sharing experiences about creativity and its role in FLL,
- Awareness- raising when comes to 'creative techniques', seeing their application for vocabulary practice ('S' test); fluency practice (Uses of object test) and disruptive behaviour or spare minute time (consequences test),
- Reflection upon their own personal definition of creativity – a step forward towards professional identity.

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