Creativity in the EFL Classroom: Exploring Teachers' Knowledge and Perceptions

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Abstract
As a response to the new requirements and needs of this fast-changing information era, higher education systems all over the world are focusing on developing learners' higher mental competences including creative thinking. The current study aims at exploring teachers' knowledge about the general concepts of creative thinking and its related skills. Moreover, the study attempts to investigate teachers' perceptions about creativity and its incorporation in the English foreign language (EFL) Classroom. To examine these issues, a questionnaire was administered to twenty-seven EFL teachers from the English department of Badji Mokhtar university, Algeria. The Findings reveal that although teachers hold positive perceptions about promoting creative thinking in the EFL classroom, they generally consider creativity as a quite confusing concept and have uncertain knowledge about its characteristics.
Key words: creativity, EFL, higher education, knowledge, perception

Introduction

As the Algerian universities move towards global competition, many changes are to take place in order to equip students with the necessary skills that enable them to perform successfully in such complex fast changing world. As far as foreign language teaching is concerned, one of the main challenges facing higher education is to change the current foreign language teaching pedagogies, which focus excessively on the accumulation of knowledge, so that greater value is placed on the development of students' mental skills including creative thinking. Promoting students creativity will not only develop their language skills but will also help them to be successful in their upcoming lives.

Teachers play a fundamental role in the language learning process and the development of learners' language competences comprising thinking skills. Developing a clear understanding of teachers' knowledge and perception of creativity is essential to inform practice on the effective inclusion of creative practices in the EFL classroom. Thus, the way teachers perceive creativity and their awareness of the adequate strategies and techniques to incorporate it may significantly influence the way they promote it in their classes. In order to provide students the appropriate creative thinking instructions in the EFL classroom it is of a prime importance to examine the actual knowledge teachers have concerning creative thinking skills as well as investigate their attitudes towards teaching these skills. The interest in this study was based on the need to reconsider the status and the role that creativity occupies in the EFL classroom. It intends to explore EFL teachers' knowledge regarding creative thinking skills and capture their perceptions towards integrating creativity activities into their courses.

Research Questions and Aims of the Study

The study addresses two research questions:
1-What is EFL teachers' knowledge regarding creative thinking skills?
2-How do EFL teachers perceive creativity within the EFL classroom?
Thus, the study aims to:
1- Explore the knowledge EFL teachers have regarding creative thinking skills
2- Investigate the perceptions of EFL teachers on teaching creative thinking skills

Theoretical Background

A survey of the literature reveals that creativity is a complex concept that flouts simple definition (Xerri & Vassallo, 2016). As Amabile (1996) as cited in Maley (2015) "a clear and sufficiently detailed articulation of the creative process is not yet possible"(p.10). Many studies attempted to conceptualize the notion of creativity but failed to attain consensus on how to describe it accurately (Sternberg et el, 1999). For Maley (2015) "the difficulty of finding an inclusive definition of creativity maybe owing to the latter's forms and manifestations" (p.6). In fact, human creativity is a multi-faceted construct that can be applied to several fields and that is considered from different perspectives which made it hard to reduce it to one explicit definition, the reason why the term remained elusive and vague (Stepnack, 2015). However, despite the plethora of definitions, there seems to be a widely accepted understanding of creativity that describes the creative act as a process leading to a novel, unique and usable product. Hence, Novelty (originality) and Value (usefulness, appropriateness) represent the main features that characterize any creative act (Ritchie, 2004; Mayer, 1999 cited in Jordanous, 2015)

Guilford's (1950) call for creativity research has shifted creativity from a vague concept to a compound construct that could be studied and measured. For him, creativity covers multiple attributes such as flexibility, fluency, novelty, synthesis, analysis, reorganization, redefinition, complexity and elaboration. These constructs constitute the most fundamental divergent thinking skills that shape the concept of creativity (Ghonsooly, 2012).

In the same line of thought, Torrance (1970) provides the most influential definition of creative thinking that describes it as "the process of sensing a problem, searching for possible solutions, drawing hypotheses, testing, evaluating and communicating results to others" (p.27). Furthermore, he described this process as "including original ideas, different points of view, breaking out of the mould, recombining ideas, and seeing new relationships among ideas" (p.27). According to him, the creative act is based on divergent thinking skills which include: fluency, flexibility, elaboration and originality as explained below:

- Fluency: the production of great number of ideas or alternate solutions to a problem,
- Flexibility: the production of ideas from different approaches that show different possibilities
- Originality: the production of novel and unusual ideas
- Elaboration: enhancing ideas by providing more details and clarity.

Whereas Guilford (1950), and Torrance (1970) view creativity in terms of divergent thinking abilities, De Bone (1969) described the creative act as an illogical process based on lateral thinking skills that involve collecting the information and making the best use of it.

As claimed by Runco (2003), scholars' definitions of creativity vary depending on how it is perceived, whether as a personality trait (creative personality), a process (creative process), a product (creative product), or environments that foster creativity. Such conceptualization falls under The Four Ps creativity approach suggested by Rhode (1961/1987) as cited in Jordanous (2015) which distinguishes Four dimensions/perspectives for creativity: Person (personality characteristics or traits of creative people); product (the result of a creative process); process (mechanism underlying creativity) and press (conditions and environment conductive to creativity).

According to Tardiff and Sternberg (1988) as cited in Fleith (2000), the first category of definition (person) underlines three main aspects: cognitive characteristics, personality, emotional qualities and experience. The second dimension (product) highlights the features of the creative product, which as mentioned previously should be unique and valuable. The definitions of creativity set in the third category (Process) involve the process leading to creative products. Such creative process can comprise new ways of looking at a problem, producing novel ideas, making unusual associations or escaping the restricting patterns of the usual thinking process. The fourth category (press) stresses the importance of the environment in the development of creative competences. These four perspectives were included later in a comprehensive definition produced by Plucker, Beghetto and Dow (2004): "Creativity is the interaction among aptitude, process, and

environment by which an individual or group produces a perceptible product that is both novel and useful as defined within a social context." (p.90).

Creative thinking for Howard (2008) is a complex cognitive process that involves the ability to move appropriately and easily between an array of thinking modes mainly analytical and generative. "These two terms emphasize the difference between the thought processes we use for critical evaluation or interpretation of an outcome and those we use to generate it in the first place" (p.8).

Haarmann (2013) defines creativity in terms of two sorts of thinking: the first is "divergent thinking" which involves multiple perspectives and numerous possible solutions to a problem unlike the second type "convergent thinking" which considers the existence of only one solution to a problem. In the creative process, both types complement each other; divergent thinking helps in the generation of many new ideas and convergent thinking seeks to evaluate these ideas and select the one that solves the problem.

Throughout all these definitions, it is clear that creativity is associated with several attributes mainly: imagination, divergence, intellectuality, lack of conventionality, originality and flexibility. This construct encloses a number of distinct dimensions such as:
- Having original and unusual thoughts about something
- The capacity to solve problems in original, pertinent and viable ways
- The ability to make new connections, often between unrelated data
- Using imagination and previous knowledge to generate new ideas and learning possibilities

The interest in promoting students' creative thinking has significantly increased since the 21st century and has become an essential objective of education (Formosa, 2016). In addition to the basic language skills, creative thinking is fundamental to EFL instruction. EFL teachers are challenged more than ever to design novel learning environments that do not focus exclusively on imparting knowledge but rather on activating students thinking abilities. Developing learners' creative thinking skills enables them to assimilate information in different ways, apply their content knowledge in diverse manners, solve problems, overcome learning challenges as well as improve their language competences (Seelig, 2012).

Creative teaching is the process leading to creative learning through the implementation of new methods, tools and content which stimulate learners' creative potential. For Horng et al (2005) creative learners need creative teachers: "only when teachers are willing to create, will students feel unrestrained and encouraged to be creative in the class", (p.355). For successful creative thinking instructions, teachers have not only the responsibility to comprise a varied menu of creative practices, but also to establish an appropriate creative classroom climate, one that is positive, open and pleasant. Students should feel comfortable, motivated and free to explore and express their opinions (Birdshell, 2013).

As Suggested by Skiba et al (as cited in Mullet, 2016), in a teaching/learning context that prioritize traditional approaches, apprehending how teachers' perceptions of creativity must be considered as a prelude to any endeavor to promote a pedagogy of creativity. Teachers' perceptions play a vital role in the pedagogical choices they make, whether concerning their teaching materials, teaching approaches and techniques, their classroom practices or their assessment tools. Therefore, when teachers understand the nature of creativity and its attributes, and when they are fully aware of its importance, they will consequently include it successfully into their teaching practices.

Research demonstrates that the way teachers perceive creativity has an impact on how they nurture it their classrooms. In his study, Odena (2010) concludes that having personal ideas about the nature of creativity could affect teachers' approaches to teaching strategies, classroom attitudes and the assessment of activities that develop creativity. Teachers ' poor knowledge about creativity may prevent them from providing the appropriate conditions that help in nurturing learners' creative potential (ibid). In their study of English teachers' attitudes towards creativity, Myhill and Wilson (2013) noticed that there is a gap between teachers' perceptions and actions; the results show that creativity can be activated through classroom activities but it cannot be taught explicitly. For Rubenstein et al (2013) classroom environment is a contributing factor to this creativity gap that refers to " the space between teachers valuing creativity and putting it into practice" (Makel 2009, p.16). Al-Qahtani (2016) examined Saudi EFL teachers' Attitudes towards creativity and concluded that teachers' lack of clear conceptions of creativity / misconceptions about creativity constitute the main reason which hinder its application in the classroom.

Methodology
In order to answer the research questions and fulfill the purpose of the study, the quantitative method was employed for data collection.

Participants
The sample population of this study was a group of 27 EFL teachers from the department of English/ Badji Mokhtar University, Annaba during the academic year of 2015/2016. A simple random selection of participants was used. As it is shown in Tables 1, 2 and 3, the majority of teachers (N=18) hold a magister degree, while only nine have a doctorate Degree. Eight teachers have a teaching experience between 5-10 years, eight have been teaching English more than 20 years, seven teachers for 11-20 years, while only four teachers have less than 5 years teaching experience. As per the specialty, ten teachers are specialized in linguistics, nine in literature and eight in civilization.

Table 1. *Participants' level*

Degree		Number	Percentage
	Magister	18	66,7
	Doctorate	9	33,3
	Total	27	100,0

Table 2. *Participants' experience*

Experience		Number	Percentage
	less than 5years	4	14,8
	5-10years	8	29,6
	11-20Years	7	25,9
	More than 20 years	8	29,6
	Total	27	100,0

Table 3. Participants' specialty

Specialty		Number	Percentage
	linguistics	10	37,0
	litterature	9	33,3
	civilisation	8	29,6
	Total	27	100,0

Data Collection Instrument

To fulfill the purpose of this study, the three first parts of the questionnaire (see appendix) that originally includes six parts were used. The whole questionnaire intended not only to discuss the questions of this study but also to address other issues related to the status of creativity and its promotion in the EFL context. The questionnaire consists of three parts. The first is a biographical section which includes three basic questions about respondents' level, experience and specialization (already discussed in tables 1, 2, and 3).

The second part of the questionnaire explores teachers' understanding and knowledge about creative thinking. It includes a list of thinking skills (all of them sub-skills of creativity) and teachers were asked to choose the ones related to creative thinking. The third part attempts to gauge teachers' perceptions about creative thinking. It used a five-point Likert scale, participants were asked to indicate their opinions about the statements by marking one of the following: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. The reliability coefficient was calculated according to the internal consistency (Cronbach alpha) providing a score of 0.81 that is considered appropriate for the purpose of the study.

In order to answer the research questions, the following data analysis method was used: sums, means and standard deviation of teachers' responses on the questionnaires. The survey collected demographic data in order to identify the profile of the responding sample. The quantitative data was analyzed with IBM SPSS STATISTICS software program (version. 22.0).

Teachers' Knowledge about Creative Thinking

In order to answer the first question of the study, the second part of the questionnaire explores teachers' knowledge about creative thinking; teachers were given a list of skills (all of them are sub-skills of creative thinking) and were required to distinguish those related to creative thinking. As could be observed in table 4, participants failed to identify all the skills; the results demonstrate that the means of 09 out of the 15 items existed in the range (0.30-0.60) that reveal unclear understanding of creative thinking skills. The results show that teachers were unable to

distinguish the key sub-skills of creativity: the third skill (M=0.33) "using old ideas to create new ones" recorded only 9 correct answers out of 27, whereas only 10 correct answers were recorded for the fourth skill " flexibility" as well as the thirteenth skill "fluency and elaboration of ideas" (M=0.37). The ninth skill (M=0.40) "Making unusual associations among unrelated things" got 11 correct answers among 27.

Table 4. *Sum, mean and standard deviation (SD) for knowledge about creative thinking*

The skill	Sum	Mean	SD
1- Brainstorming/ Generating new ideas	13,00	,481	,509
2- Evaluating and interpreting an idea	19,00	,703	,465
3- Using old ideas to create new ones	9,00	,333	,480
4- Flexibility	10,00	,370	,492
5- Relating knowledge from several areas	4,00	,148	,362
6- Solving problems by imagination	24,00	,888	,320
7- The ability to produce various ideas/Solutions about the same thing/problem	13,00	,481	,509
8- Thinking outside the box	20,00	,740	,446
9- Making unusual associations among unrelated things	11,00	,407	,500
10- Seeking for new ways of looking at a problem	21,00	,777	,423
11- Drawing conclusions	12,00	,444	,506
12- Generalizing from given facts	13,00	,481	,509
13- Fluency and elaboration of ideas/Divergent Thinking	10,00	0,370	0,492
14- Curiosity and Risk-taking	17,00	0,629	0,492
15- Producing a solution that is both novel and suitable	22,00	0,814	0,395

Teachers also expressed their doubt regarding the skills of "Generating new ideas", "the ability to produce various ideas and solutions", "drawing conclusions" and "generalizing from given facts" which scored with 13 correct answers (M=0.44). The least score was recorded with the fifth skill "Relating knowledge from several skills" which was fitted in the low range with only 4 correct answers out of 27. Only five out of the fifteen statements existed in the high range (0.66-1). The highest mean (M=0.88) was recorded with the sixth skill "solving problems by imagination" with 24 correct answers, followed by fifteenth skill (M=0.81): "Producing a solution that is both novel and useful", then comes the tenth skill (M=0.77): "seeking for new ways of looking at a problem" with 21 correct answers. The eighth skill "Thinking outside the box" scored 20 correct answers with a mean of (M=0.74). Finally the second skill "evaluating and interpreting ideas" comes last in the high range with a mean score (M=0.70).

These findings reveal a lack of a clear understanding of creativity. Teachers' responses show a poor knowledge about creative thinking skills which inhibit effective integration of creativity activities into their language classrooms. The results demonstrate that though teachers succeeded to recognize the skills of imagination, production of novel and valuable solutions to problems, risk

taking, thinking outside the box and evaluation/ Interpretation of ideas, they failed to identify a significant number of skills that are basic for creativity such as brainstorming, fluency, flexibility, making unusual association among unrelated things, relating knowledge from different areas, and using old ideas to produce new ones. Given these negative results, EFL teachers seem to struggle with the concept of creativity and have poor knowledge about the nature of creative thinking skills. Teachers' unfamiliarity with the notion of creativity may affect considerably the way they perceive it and integrate it into the English language activities.   As a result, EFL teachers need to be prepared and equipped with the necessary tools, through appropriate creative thinking education, to ensure successful implementation of creative thinking instructions.

Teachers' Perceptions towards Creative Thinking Skills

To answer the second question, the third part of the questionnaire explored teachers' perceptions regarding creativity and its importance in the English language classroom. Teachers were required to respond to a 14 statements' perception scale. Data analysis reveals in Table 5 that the means of nine statements out of sixteen fell into the high range of agreement. The first highest mean (M=4.550) was recorded for the statement "I intend to incorporate creative thinking in my course". The second highest mean (M=4.450) was recorded for the statement   "creative thinking enhances independent and active learning". Participants strongly agreed "creative thinking activities are essential in the language classroom" (M=4.400). With a high mean score of (M=4,350) teachers agreed that "fostering students' creative thinking is my responsibility" and that "to implement creative thinking effectively into my course I would need training". They also agreed (M=4.300) that they do not have the necessary skills to promote students creativity. With a mean score of (M=3.600), teachers strongly agreed that they have a vague understanding of creativity. As per incorporating creative thinking activities into the language classroom, teachers believe that such activities improve their teaching skills (M= 3.800) though "teaching for the exam doesn't leave time for these creative activities" (M=3.550). Besides, their disagreement about the fourteenth statement (M=3.55) proves that they do not consider the integration of creativity activities as an additional workload.

Table 5. *Sum, mean and standard deviation (SD) for perceptions on creative thinking*

Statement	Sum	Mean	SD
1- I intend to incorporate creative thinking activities in my course	91,00	4,550	0,510
2- Creativity is a vague concept to me/ I'm familiar with creativity and its sub	72.00	3.600	1.046
3- Creative thinking enhances independent and active learning	89,00	4,450	0,492
4- Creative thinking activities are essential in the language classroom	88,00	4,400	0,502
5- Fostering students' creative thinking is my responsibility	87,00	4,350	0,489
6- Using creative thinking activities improves my teaching skills	76,00	3,800	0,510
7- I do not have the necessary skills to promote students' creativity	86,00	4,300	0,470
8- During exam, it is necessary to ask questions that encourage creative thinking	39,00	2,150	0,894

9- I need additional support/Training to implement creativity appropriately	87,00	4,350	0,489
10- I think that students have barriers to creative thinking regardless of the strategies I use	43,00	2,350	0,850
11- The current language classroom can improve students' creativity	57,00	2,800	0,850
12- I am aware when my students use creative thinking abilities	50,00	2,700	0,759
13-Teaching to the Test/Exam doesn't leave time for creative abilities	71,00	3,550	0,825
14- Integrating creative thinking activities is an additional workload	69,00	3,450	0,815

The lowest scores were recorded with the statements eight, nine, eleven and twelve. Participants expressed their doubt about the statement "the current language classroom can improve students' creativity" (M=2.800); they were also uncertain about their awareness of when students make use of creative abilities (M=2.700). The ninth statement "I think that students have barriers to creative thinking regardless of the strategies I use" collected a strong agreement among teachers (M=2.350). The least mean (M=2.150) was recorded for the seventh statement that pointed that teachers generally do not think that exam questions should include creative thinking activities.

The findings reflect positive teachers' perceptions towards the integration of creativity in the language learning process and the importance of creative thinking activities in the language classroom. EFL teachers at the English department of Annaba-university were found to strongly agree that creative thinking not only improves their teaching skills but also enable students to become better thinkers and active learners. They agreed that creative thinking could be used to achieve better learning outcomes and promote students language skills. Even if the participants in this study believe that it's their responsibility to promote students creative thinking, they feel that they do not have the necessary competences to assume such responsibility effectively, and consequently need additional support and training to implement it into their courses which supports the concluding results of the second part. Teachers do not consider the inclusion of creativity into the language activities as an additional workload though teaching to prepare students for exams doesn't leave enough time for the selection, organization and incorporation of to this type of tasks.

However, the obtained results indicate teachers' unfamiliarity with the concept of creativity that reflects their weak awareness about when students used creative abilities in their courses. The findings of this study show that teachers hold vague and unclear understanding about the nature of creativity as they expressed their disagreement about including activities that encourage creative thinking skills into the exam questions. For teachers, exams are supposed to assess students' content knowledge not to stimulate or evaluate their creative abilities. Furthermore, the results demonstrate that having a syllabus to follow and teaching for exams restrict significantly teachers' willingness to go beyond the confines set for them and place creativity as one of their teaching priorities. Moreover, the data analysis displays teacher's beliefs about students' unwillingness to employ or develop creative thinking competences despite the methods or techniques they apply. Such reluctance from the part of students constitutes another factor limiting the implementation of creativity in the EFL context.

Conclusion

The study revealed that teachers hold positive opinions about the value and the relevance of cultivating creative thinking in the EFL classroom. They recognized the essential role creativity plays in developing students' intellectual skills and academic achievements. However, despite such positive attitudes, there is a common perception among EFL teachers surveyed in this study that they do not have the required competences to teach creative thinking skills, they feel that they are not prepared to promote creativity or apply any kind of creative pedagogies. Therefore, it is recommended that in order to offer EFL students some creative learning experiences, teachers positive attitudes are not enough. Teachers need to receive adequate training and orientations that will familiarize them with the notions of creativity and the appropriate practices that promote it. Addressing teachers' misconceptions about the nature of creative thinking and its related sub-skills leads to a proper selection of strategies, approaches, and activities that nurture students' creative competences. Moreover, if creativity is to be effectively enhanced, its position in the curriculum should be reconsidered. Developing students thinking skills including creativity deserves to be among the main objectives of teaching English at tertiary education.

This study attempts to encourage teachers to embrace creativity in their daily classroom routines. When taking into account that all participants answered none of the questionnaire's statements that explored creative thinking knowledge correctly, one may believe that teachers need to realize that creativity is not an optional learning skill but rather one of the main 21st century educational objectives. In this new information era, it is necessary to make the EFL classroom a modern, fresh, dynamic and learner-centered place in which teachers explore new practices that unlock students' creative potential.

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Appendix: Teachers' Questionnaire

Dear *Colleague*,

This questionnaire is a data collection tool that aims at exploring the status and the promotion of creativity in the EFL context. You are kindly requested to respond to the following questions as accurately as possible. Your collaboration will be of a great help to make the research work achieves its objectives.

Section I/ Biographical information

1. Degree: B.A. / License □   M.A. / Magister □   Ph.D. / Doctorate □

2. Teaching Experience:

    Less than 5 years □   5 - 10 years □   11 – 20 years □   more than 20 years □

3. **Area (s) of Specialty**:

Linguistics □   Literature □   Civilization □   Cultural Studies □
Sociolinguistics □   Applied Linguistics □   Stylistics □   □ Educational Psychology
Other:………………………………………..

Section II/ Teachers knowledge about Creativity

 Among the following skills, please select the one(s) related to creative thinking:

1.   . Brainstorming/ Generating new ideas □
2.   .Evaluating and interpreting an idea □
3.   .Using old ideas to create new ones □
4.   .Flexibility □
5.   .Relating knowledge from several areas □
6.   .Solving problems by imagination□
7.   .the ability to produce various ideas:/Solutions to the same problem □
8.   .Thinking outside the box/ outside the norms □
9.   .Making unusual associations among unrelated things□
10. .Seeking for new ways of looking at a problem □
11. .Drawing conclusions □
12. .Summarizing an article in one's own words □
13. .Fluency and elaboration of relevant ideas
14. .Curiosity and Risk-taking □
15. .Producing a solution that is both novel and useful □

Section Three/ Teachers' Perceptions about Creativity

Please thick (✓) the option that best describes your view (SD= strongly disagree, D= disagree, N=neutral, A=agree, SA= strongly agree)

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
1-I intend to incorporate creative thinking activities in my course					
2-Creativity is a vague concept to me/ I'm familiar with creativity and its sub					
1- Creative thinking enhances independent and active learning					
4-Creative thinking activities are essential in the language classroom					
5-Fostering students' creative thinking is my responsibility					
6-Using creative thinking activities improves my teaching skills					
7-I do not have the necessary skills to promote students' creativity					
8-During exam, it is necessary to ask questions that encourage creative thinking					
9-I need additional support/training to implement creativity appropriately					

10- I think that students have barriers to creative thinking regardless of the strategies I use					
11- the current language classroom can improve students' creativity					
12- I am aware when my students use creative thinking abilities					
13-Teaching to the Test/Exam doesn't leave time for creative abilities					
14- Integrating creative thinking activities is an additional workload					