Creativity in ELT Research

Mehvish Saleem, Katja Težak, Sarah Mercer & Daniel Xerri

Introduction

In this short article, we argue that creativity is a characteristic of being a good ELT researcher. We suggest that there is much overlap in the skills and knowledge required to research well and those of a creative thinker. Consequently, we propose that research training courses could explicitly promote and enhance participants' creative thinking skills as part of their programmes.

Defining creativity

Creativity is a highly popular term in contemporary educational discourse, featuring in countless policy documents and programmes (Sharp & Le Métais, 2000). In many contexts, there seems to be an agreement that education should serve the purpose of fostering young people's creativity. Hence, curricula often cite creative skills as desirable objectives (Heilmann & Korte, 2010). However, despite the fact that creativity has recently become an educational buzzword, there remain a number of misconceptions about what creativity actually is.

One misconception concerns how creativity is defined. In lay terms, people often associate it merely with arts and crafts, limiting its definition to only such forms of output. Equally problematic are definitions, which are too broadly all-encompassing viewing every form of educational endeavour as creative. Despite these problems, there have been a number of attempts to identify the defining qualities of creativity (see, e.g., Batey & Furnham, 2006; Plucker, Beghetto, & Dow, 2004). In their review of definitions of creativity from the 1800s onwards, Runco and Jaeger (2012) conclude that, "the standard definition is bipartite: Creativity requires both originality and effectiveness" (p. 92). Here originality is often conceptualised as being associated with novelty, unusualness, or uniqueness, while effectiveness might entail usefulness, appropriateness, or value.

This bipartite definition of creativity can be extended even further by means of Rhodes's (1987) 4Ps approach, which refers to the four areas to which this definition of creativity relates: the *person* who acts as a creator, the cognitive *processes* at play during creation, the *press* or environmental influences in operation, and the created *product*. In other words, "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*" (Plucker, Beghetto, & Dow, 2004, p. 90). For the purposes of this article, we will define creativity as being a set of complex cognitive process, which involves identifying and solving a problem through a myriad of intertwined thought processes in order to produce something new, surprising and useful and/or valuable.

Since it is our goal to explore the similarities between the activity of research and creativity as a skill set, we also want to take a closer look at the typical stages within a creative process. A basic four-stage model of the creative process was developed by Wallas (1926) and contains the stages of *preparation, incubation, illumination,* and *verification.* Many later models are based on this (e.g., Amabile, 1996; Busse & Mansfield, 1980; Cagle, 1985), and the four stages remain at the core of all the models. *Preparation* involves a preliminary analysis and the defining of the problem. The *incubation* stage involves active cognitive work on the problem as well as a passive subconscious formation of connections and associations. In the *illumination* phase, a possible solution or solutions are formulated, and, in the last phase of *verification*, these possible solutions are examined more closely and evaluated to assess their adequacy for the task at hand (Lubart, 2001). Reflecting on these phases, the connections between creativity and research processes start to emerge more clearly. Most research projects involve finding and defining a problem or puzzle. This stage is typically accompanied by and followed by the processes of expanding one's knowledge about the topic and thinking more deeply about it. The aim of research is then to actively search for possible connections and answers to our questions. Research design helps to find answers to research questions – a process which may take a lot of time and reflection considering the suitability and usefulness of the design for the aims of the study. Finally, we evaluate our ideas, thinking, research design and possible answers to our questions, assessing whether they seem appropriate for the context and questions and whether they offer original, new insights to the topic under investigation.

Characteristics of good research

As O'Leary (2004) explains, all good research is a "thinking person's game […] a creative and strategic process that involves constantly assessing, reassessing, and making decisions about the best possible means for obtaining trustworthy information, carrying out appropriate analysis, and drawing credible conclusions" (p. 2). Both research and creativity involve assessing and reassessing, going backwards and forwards, reshaping ideas until a novel and useful solution is found. In this article for the ease of writing, we discuss research from a very linear perspective but acknowledge that in reality and in creative terms, this process is likely to be more cyclic in nature.

Considering in a little more detail the typical stages of a research project, it often begins with generating original questions worth asking or puzzles worth reflecting upon. This can be thought of as a parallel to the first of the four-stage model of creative process (i.e., preparation) outlined in section 2. Researchers might gain ideas from reviewing the literature or noticing contradictions or puzzles in their language teaching practice. The development of research ideas requires us to look at the familiar from different perspectives, thinking of useful ways forward and considering original perspectives on the topic.

Once the focus of the study has been chosen, the next stage is typically to design the study in a way that offers the most likely and best method of generating data to answer specific questions or to cast light on puzzling issues. In creativity terms, this could be thought of as the incubation stage. It requires time and reflective thinking to develop an effective and appropriate research methodology. During this stage, researchers also need to consider carefully the ethical dilemmas posed by their study. This needs researchers to spend time reflecting deeply on participants' perspectives, considering how they may be affected by the research approach, tools, methods, and questions, and what they gain from the experience.

Though the methodology may vary in each study, its credibility relies upon its 1) ability to address the questions, 2) suitability for the researcher, and 3) availability of time, resources, and necessary ethical approvals needed to conduct research (O'Leary, 2004). Such design requirements do not limit creativity, but rather they serve as a framework for exploring a range of methods that are "imaginative yet focused, intuitive yet logical, flexible yet methodical, ingenious yet practical" (ibid, p. 101). Here again, creativity plays a central role in ensuring that the research meets all of these challenges, considers the multiple perspectives and yet is open to fresh thinking that meets the design needs and questions of the study.

When it comes to data analysis, creative thinking is again vital for the researcher. Analysis begins with the researcher looking at raw data seeking to make meaningful interpretations. This can be thought of as the illumination phase in which the researcher incorporates their knowledge as well as their creative thinking skills to assess the significance of the findings or discover themes as well as consider absences, all the while remaining open to finding the unexpected or the seemingly inexplicable.

Another key stage where creativity has a role to play is in the sharing of research in which researchers disseminate the findings, insights, and shortcomings of their study and reflect on implications for practice and future research. Sharing is a creative act that necessitates researchers to imagine their audience,

consider how best to articulate and communicate an original message that is useful for the intended audience. The verification phase of the creative process model can be thought of as including an open, in-depth, and reflective account of the research processes in which the final output is made comprehensible for and accessible to public evaluation.

Implications for practice

In this article, we have suggested that creativity is an important characteristic of good empirical studies and can help researchers to produce original research of value to the wider community. Useful suggestions for promoting creativity can be found in the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. His work offers many rich insights but for the purposes of this article, we have chosen to focus on three key ideas that could be actively incorporated into researcher training and development. The first is, "Try to be surprised by something every day" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009, p. 347). Csikszentmihalyi suggests that in our adult lives we stop being surprised or intrigued by things that we see every day or that we perceive as ordinary. As researchers, we need to develop a creative disposition with a view to questioning the familiar and looking at every day events in the teaching and learning context so as to expose anomalies, puzzles or questions we wish to investigate or better understand. To generate new and original insights, we need to retain the ability to be amazed, see things afresh and to not take anything for granted.

In a similar vein, the second suggestion we can work with is, "When something strikes a spark of interest, follow it" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009, p. 348). When we find something that intrigues us or makes us wonder, we should hold on to it and try to develop our thinking about this. It might be some aspect of teaching and learning or something we come across in our reading or something we notice in our data. Making memos or keeping a research journal is a powerful way of following up our intuitions and interesting leads, ensuring our mind explores all avenues, and our thinking remains open.

Another key suggestion believed to promote creativity is, "Make time for reflection and relaxation" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009, p. 353). In order to enable our brain to think most effectively and creatively, we need to plan in rest and time away from our computers, data and classrooms. Not focusing on a problem or challenge for a while and engaging wholeheartedly in another relaxing and fun activity can free our minds and enable us to contemplate fresh ideas, new perspectives, and alternative viewpoints. Quite literally, a change of environment can alter our perspectives, helping us to see the world from another point of view.

In terms of generating ideas about what to research, how to research, or how to analyse and interpret the data, Csikszentmihalyi (2009) suggests that we should

look at problems from as many different viewpoints as possible, generate as many ideas as possible, and attempt to produce unlikely ideas (pp. 365-369). If we can manage to look at our research from as many viewpoints as possible, we increase our chances of finding new perspectives, seeing things we had become blind to, questioning our assumptions and opening our mind to alternative ways of doing research, and thinking, talking or writing about our questions or puzzles. There are many more recommendations on increasing creativity by Csikszentmihalyi in his work, and they have been used and discussed in a variety of fields such as preparing online learning activities (Muirhead, 2007) or discussing the benefits of increasing domain-specific knowledge (Sternberg, 1998); however, given space limitations, we selected only the above as they seemed to resonate strongest with the process of research.

Conclusion

There is much more that is yet to be explored about the concept of creativity in research processes. However, we hope that our first attempt at thinking explicitly about research in ELT from a creativity perspective illustrates the rich potential that we feel this line of thinking may offer. We conclude that training novice researchers in activities and strategies believed to foster creative thinking would add a valuable set of skills to their toolkit as empirical researchers. As O'Leary (2004, p. 1) explains it is not sufficient to know about methods to be an effective researcher, you must without a doubt "creatively and strategically 'think' your way through the whole process".

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Biodata

Mehvish Saleem is reading for a PhD in Applied Linguistics at the University of Graz. She previously taught as a lecturer of English as a Second Language in Pakistan.
Email: mehvish.saleem@edu.uni-graz.at

Katja Težak is an English and German reader and lecturer at the University in Maribor Slovenia. She is doing a PhD in EFL didactics at the University in Graz.
Email: katja.tezak@um.si

Sarah Mercer is Professor of Foreign Language Teaching at Graz University. Her latest publication (with Marion Williams and Stephen Ryan) is "*Exploring Psychology in Language Learning and Teaching*" with Oxford University Press.
Email: sarah.mercer@uni-graz.at

Daniel Xerri is a lecturer in TESOL at the University of Malta, and the chairperson of the ELT Council within the Ministry for Education and Employment in Malta. Further details can be found at www.danielxerri.com
Email: daniel.xerri@um.edu.mt