

## Literature and Creativity in an ELT Context

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**Abstract:**

*There is now a growing consensus among scientists and researchers that the mental and personal factors of individuals play a vital role in learning, especially learning English as a second language. Creativity, as one of these human factors, is believed to significantly affect L2 learning and life skills among human beings. Moreover, employing literature as the content of instruction in ELT is believed to provide EFL teachers and learners with numerous advantages, including higher levels of creativity. Based on this premise, this study suggests seven techniques which intend to promote creativity through employing literature in an EFL classroom. Following these techniques, some implementation concerns are stated in order to increase the chance of obtaining satisfactory results when employing these techniques. These concerns address the peculiarities of classroom environment, the role of cultural awareness, the importance of interaction, the significance of selecting a literary work, the appropriate feedback types, and motivation. The article concludes with some avenues for future research.*

**Keywords:** *creativity, effective learning, literature, personal growth*

## **1. Introduction**

The practice of teaching a new language to second language learners is believed to be a multi-faceted issue which calls for considering two basic domains. The first domain deals with the way pedagogical objectives are put into practice which is mainly concerned with the methodology supporting the practice. However, the personal and mental characteristic of the learners, generally known as human factors, are believed to exert a profound and unquestionable impact on second language learning (Nosratinia & Zaker, 2014, 2015; Zaker, 2015, 2016). Moreover, these human factors seem to have cardinal importance where we seek to develop a theory for teaching language and improve the productivity of classroom practice (Fahim & Zaker, 2014; Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

Creativity (CR), as one of these human factors, not only is among the hot topics of TEFL, but is also gaining a growing recognition as a metacognitive factor which substantially affects, influences, and shapes the process of learning English as a second/foreign language (Connolly, 2000; Kabilan, 2000; Nosratinia & Zaker, 2014; Sarsani, 2006). This premise is also reflected in Kabilan's (2000) statement where he argues that for learners to become proficient in a language, they need to exercise creative thinking through the language being learned.

As defined by Lubart (1999), CR, by and large, is considered to be the capacity to produce novel and original creations which are considered suitable for the attributes and peculiarities of a task at hand; these products might be related to different concepts, perspectives, and innovations. Additionally, these creations and products are expected to be "original as they should not be just a mere copy of what already exists" (Lubart & Guignard, 2004, p. 43). Thus, it may be argued that CR would increase the chance of the learner to respond appropriately and relevantly to the myriad of situations of the daily life for which no predetermined and fixed language-wise responses are available.

It seems that the reinforcement of CR in education systems is particularly vital when it comes to improving both educational achievement and life skills of learners (Agarwal, 1992). There is a growing body of research in our field that aims at conducting further investigation into the nature of CR and the way it promotes learning a new language, and many attempts have been made to inspect the way CR is associated with other learner factors (Fahim & Zaker, 2014; Nosratinia & Zaker, 2013). Nevertheless, it would be of high value to inspect the way pedagogical techniques and the classroom practice would affect CR.

Given the content of EFL/ESL materials, there is a unanimous consensus that curricula design and the classroom materials have a significant impact on both language acquisition and personal factors (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, 2012; Nation & Macalister, 2010). Moreover, employing literature as the content in ELT is believed to provide EFL teachers and learners with engaging and authentic materials (Bibby, 2012) which, according to McKay (1982), would promote CR among EFL learners. Correspondingly, this study attempts to address the peculiarities of using literature in an EFL classroom and the way it can promote CR among EFL learners. To achieve

this purpose, the following sections present the attributes of CR, barriers to CR, and seven classroom techniques aimed at promoting CR through using literary texts.

## **2. Attributes of Creativity**

For many years, psychologists were fascinated by CR and qualities of creative people (Campbell, 1985). According to Murdock, Treffinger, Young, Selby, and Shepardson (as cited in Isaksen et al., 2010) many studies have been conducted in this area which made it possible to define the qualities and characteristics of highly creative individuals. Cropley (1992) described a creative person as:

A person who is intelligent and capable of sustained hard work, who seeks change and adventure, who is impulsive, and who does not like to conform. The creative thinker is inclined to avoid adherence to strict and restrictive schedules and, as a result, may show a certain disregard for observing rules and details of plans. In fact, many creative individuals give a strong impression of being disorganized, although they may also show meticulous attention to detail when circumstances require it. (p. 18)

Torrance (as cited in Khandwalla, 2004, p. 24) held that all the scholars who worked on creative personality highlighted some principal characteristics of creative people. According to Torrance (as cited in Khandwalla, 2004), these attributes are a) curiosity, b) sensitivity, c) independence, d) persistence, e) self-sufficiency, f) imaginativeness, g) complexity, h) risk taking, and i) being realistic. Simonton (as cited in Tan, 2007, p. xxxiv) added two other traits, namely openness to new experience and having wide range of interest. Later, Alder (2002) proposed a more comprehensive list by adding the following characteristics: a) originality, b) energy, c) attraction to new and complex ideas, d) appreciation of art, e) open-mindedness, f) need to have a private life, and g) self- awareness of CR. Table 1 presents the common characteristics of a creative person based on the definitions provided above.

**Table 1. Characteristics of a Creative Person**

A creative person is:	
1. Intelligent	11. Self-sufficient
2. Determined	12. Imaginative
3. Flexible	13. Risk taker
4. Impulsive	14. Realistic
5. Avoids adherence to strict and restrictive schedules	15. Open to new experience
6. Has meticulous attention to details,	16. Has a wide range of interest
7. Curious	17. Energetic
8. Sensitive	18. Attracted to new and complex ideas
9. Independent	19. Appreciates art
10. Persistent	20. Needs to have a private life
	21. Has self- awareness of creativity

### **3. Barriers to Creativity**

A vast body of research has been conducted on different factors which would block CR. The findings of these studies have made it possible to introduce different factors as the barriers to CR (Adams, 1974; Arnold, 1962; Majaro, 1992). Therefore, it is a well-justified attempt to explore these hindering factors when attempting to boost CR. Davis (1999) stated that:

Barriers are blocks, internal or external, that either inhibit creative thinking and inspiration or else prevent innovative ideas from being accepted and implemented. Most barriers result from learning. They may originate with one's family, peers, community, or educational environment, or from others in the culture. (p. 165)

Other studies attempted to provide the actual factors which would block CR in an individual. For instance, Arnold (as cited in Proctor, 2010, p. 31) identified the barriers to CR as follows:

- **Perceptual barriers:** resulted from factors that inhibit true identification of the world;
- **Emotional barriers:** resulted from factors like fear of risk taking or making a mistake, stress, and feeling unsafe; &
- **Cultural barriers:** resulted from the impact of society on the individual.

Subsequently, Adams (as cited in Sarsani, 2006, p. 158) made the list more comprehensive by adding the following factors:

- **Environmental blocks:** resulted from the impact of the immediate environment;
- **Intellectual blocks:** resulted from lack of flexibility in using problem-solving strategies; &
- **Expressive Blocks:** resulted from lack of language skills to express ideas.

Through a different lens, Soliman (2005) classified barriers to CR in a broader categorization as follows: a) historical, b) biological, c) physiological, d) sociological, and e) psychological barriers. Soliman (2005) further stated that psychological barriers, that block CR from inside, are the most important factors when compared to other barriers. In a relevant study, Malone (2003) identified some major psychological barriers:

- self-imposed barriers
- conformity to one expected pattern
- not trying to challenge the obvious
- rush in evaluation or judgment
- fear of looking stupid
- lack of willingness to challenge
- anxiety
- lack of faith in your own abilities

#### **4. Literature and Promoting Creativity**

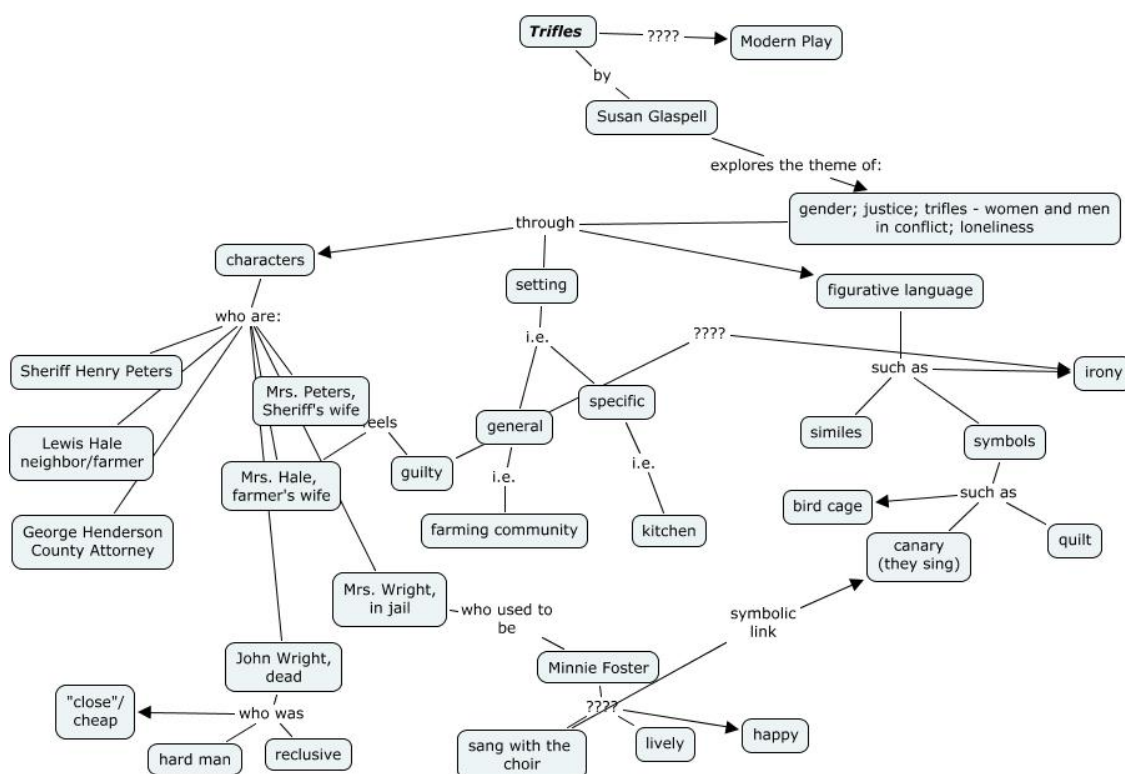
CR is a mental construct whose contribution to language learning is plenteous (Albert & Kormos, 2011; Nosratinia & Zaker, 2014). Pink (as cited in Rao & Prasad, 2009, p. 31) argues that humankind is “entering a new age where creative thinking is becoming increasingly important.” CR has also been considered to be “about developing skills in thinking” (Sarsani, 2005, p. 134). Human beings are all equipped with an enormous inner potential for CR and learning (Nosratinia & Zaker, 2015), and CR is believed to be subject to improvement “at all ages and in all fields of human endeavor” (Sarsani, 2005, p. 47). Moreover, education is expected to “enable people to generate and implement new ideas and to adapt positively to different changes in order to survive in the current world” (Jeffrey & Leibling, 2001, p. ix).

It seems that the reinforcement of CR in the educational system is particularly vital when it comes to improving both educational achievement and life skills of learners (Agarwal, 1992). Moreover, it is quite reasonable to state that the TEFL/TESOL practice and its product which is L2 proficiency, as an example of such an educational attainment, can be highly influenced by CR (Fahim & Zaker, 2014). This is why Ormerod, Fritz, and Ridgeway (1999) hold that, “Changes in educational practice ... place an emphasis on creativity in task design” (p. 502). Therefore, it is a critical issue to attempt to promote CR among EFL learners when dealing with language as the main concern of instruction.

Employing literature as the content of instruction is believed to bring about numerous advantages, e.g. a higher degree of motivation, authenticity of the input, personal relevance, economy, social and cultural awareness, extended linguistic knowledge, higher degree of CR, and better performance in writing (Arthur, 1968; Bedi, 2011; Bibby, 2012; Maley, 1989; McKay, 1982; Spack, 1985). Literary language may be considered more indirect and more elevated (Hall, 2005) with more creative sound structure, choice of words used, and word combinations (Pope, 2002). Carter and Nash (1983), however, advise avoiding a strict binary literary/non-literary, instead proposing a spectrum of literariness. Bearing these points in mind, and based on the components and barriers of CR discussed above, a model of promoting CR through employing literature in an ELT context is presented below which is hoped to assist EFL teachers in promoting CR among their learners.

##### **▪ Brainstorming**

This technique is believed to result in producing various ideas to a given problem without being worried about the criticism of others. Such a technique can be used both individually and collectively when dealing with a literary text in order to complete different tasks, e.g. figuring out the meaning of words, analyzing the plot and the techniques employed in the text, inspecting the cultural and social points, and finding the intention behind composing the text. Figure 1 shows a brainstorming diagram based on Susan Glaspell’s play, *Trifles*.



**Figure 1. A Brainstorming Based on Glaspell's Play**

### ■ Questions Checklist

This procedure focuses on answering a list of questions which are designed to find possible ways to solve a problem. Each question might address a different step of solving the problem and its options. The teacher can prepare such questions based on the objective of the course and the pedagogical concerns in a specific classroom. Students might answer these questions individually or through interaction with other classmates which is in favor of Long's (1991) Interaction Hypothesis and Nunan's (2004) ideas about communicative activities.

### ■ Attribute Changing

The focus of this procedure is on producing a list of all the modifiable attributes of an item, and then thinking about possible ways to make a change in those attributes to come up with new ideas. The main focus is on general modifications instead of specific ones. Employing this technique would encourage the learners to use their own L2 knowledge and engage in a mental process which enables them inspect the commonality between items. This task seems to encourage many of the elements of CR which are mentioned in Table 1. For instance, flexibility to new ideas, avoiding adherence to strict rules, curiosity, independence, and openness are among the main attributes which seems to be encouraged through this technique.



▪ **Reader's Questions:**

Here, the teacher would ask the learners to write questions on an assigned reading (literary text) and turn them in at the beginning of class. Some of the questions will be selected as the impetus for class discussion.

▪ **Learners' Exam Questions**

Students will be asked to prepare some questions based on a material which can be used in the final exam. These questions will be exchanged among the learners and the teacher would provide some general comments on the quality of the questions.

▪ **Preparing a Novel Ending**

In this task, the learners would not be presented with the whole literary text. The teacher or a student would provide the literary text which lacks the final section, and the EFL learners would be asked to prepare a new and self-made final section which would be presented to the class. Guilford (as cited in Russ & Fiorelli, 2010) identified divergent thinking and transformation abilities as main categories of cognitive processes important in CR. Agars et al. (2008) described divergent thinking as the analysis of various responses to questions when no clear single answer is available. Therefore, it seems well-justified to employ this exercise in order to promote CR through literature use.

▪ **Retelling**

EFL learners would be asked to retell the poem or story using their own language. It is suggested to employ this task in a way that some volunteer learners would present the summary of the literary text which is to be studied and in a specific session. Therefore, the learners have to be informed beforehand. This task aims to encourage out-of-classroom engagement among the learners as well as autonomy and elaboration, which are among the components of CR.

## **5. Implementation Concerns**

Sletzer and Bently (as cited in Gilbert, 2005) believed that some factors should be available in the learning environment in order to stimulate CR. These factors are: freedom, faith, diversity in context, mutual exchange of knowledge and opinions, balance between skills and challenges, and real world outcomes (p. 136). The same view is held by Hota (2000) indicating that it is possible to promote CR by putting individual in a highly standard educational environment. He mentioned some factors like school context, non-evaluative climate of class, teachers' attitudes and roles, methodology of teaching, and techniques in asking question as possible ways to promote CR.

The seven techniques stated above are believed to encourage CR when using literature as the content of classroom instruction. However, there are some points which should be considered when attempting to employ these techniques. The first factor is cultural awareness which is believed to enable the learner to interpret and

comprehend the actual meaning of a literary text (Arthur, 1968; Bibby, 2012; Eaton, 2010; Zaker, 2016). In this case, the teacher might set the scene through introducing the relevant cultural aspects and values to the students before engaging with the pedagogical activities.

The second concern of the teacher should be encouraging group work and interaction among the learners when dealing with the activities. Long (1991) proposed the Interaction Hypothesis which seems to be one of the basic elements of present era's pedagogical concerns. It is now believed that language learners should be encouraged and be given the agency to use the language in order to master language skills (Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Nunan, 2004).

Selecting the literary text is another crucial factor which is believed to facilitate the interaction with the material (McKay, 1982; Short & Candlin, 1986). While the pedagogical concerns and the objectives of an EFL course should not be underestimated, it is suggested to encourage the learners to participate in the process of choosing the literary text which would result in higher degrees of motivation and engagement among learners (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000; Robinson, 2001). This point is in line with Johnson's (1989) ideas which confirm that the one-way flow of information is inherent in a predetermined syllabus and the lack of interaction and consultation with the learner fails to mobilize their internal syllabi.

The final factor which is believed to play a major role in any EFL classroom is feedback. It is obvious that all the people engaged in the classroom activities, i.e. the teacher, learner him/herself, and the classmates might have the chance to provide the correction. However, it has been suggested to first give the learners the chance to correct themselves, and if self-correction did not work, other students should be given the chance to correct the error (Ellis, 2003). Teacher's intervention and correction should be considered as the last option and should be provided only when it is necessary.

## **6. Conclusion**

This article initially stated the role which mental and personal factors play in learning English as a second language (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). CR, as one of these unique human factors, is believed to play a significant role in improving both L2 learning and life skills of learners (Agarwal, 1992; Fahim & Zaker, 2014; Kabilan, 2000). Accordingly, this study set out to focus on using literature as the content of classroom instruction would promote CR among EFL learners.

Employing literature as the content of instruction in ELT is widely believed to provide EFL teachers and learners with numerous advantages, ranging from the authenticity of the materials to higher degrees of motivation, communicative competence, discourse and culture related factors, and CR (Bedi, 2011; Bibby, 2012; Eaton, 2010; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; McKay, 1982; Nunan, 2004). Based on this premise, the researcher suggested seven techniques which intend to promote CR through employing literature in an EFL classroom; these techniques are: 1) brainstorming, 2) questions checklist, 3) attribute changing, 4) reader's questions, 5) learners' exam questions, 6) preparing a novel ending, and 7) retelling.



In addition to the techniques stated above, some practical concerns were also discussed in order to increase the chance of obtaining better results from using literature in an EFL classroom. These concerns address the peculiarities of classroom's environment (Gilbert, 2005; Hota, 2000), the role of cultural awareness (Arthur, 1968; Bibby, 2012; Eaton, 2010), the importance of interaction (Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Nunan, 2004), the significance of selecting a literary work (McKay, 1982; Short & Candlin, 1986), the appropriate feedback types (Ellis, 2003), and motivation (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000; Robinson, 2001). It is hoped that the proposed techniques suggested in this study would assist EFL teachers in employing literature in the classroom as a vehicle for achieving higher levels of productivity, motivation, and self-development among learners as well as teachers. However, experimental studies are required to inspect and evaluate the impact of employing these techniques in EFL contexts and the way they affect CR and second language acquisition.

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