

The Benefits and Downsides of Creative Methods of Teaching in an EFL Classroom: A Case Study Conducted at South East European University, Tetovo-Macedonia.

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Abstract

This paper looks at the creative methods in English Language Teaching (ELT) and the benefits and downsides that emerge subsequently. It looks at different viewpoints on creativity and creative methods in teaching. It focuses on a particular class (Academic English), at South East European University, Tetovo-Macedonia, where creative methods were applied and discusses the advantages and disadvantages of applying these techniques. The class is observed and the data or findings are presented in a qualitative way. The results imply that despite some possible downfalls, creative teachers show better results in English language teaching and learning compared to the traditional way of teaching.

Keywords: benefits, downsides, creative methods, teaching, learning, ELT

1. Introduction

1.1. *Creative Teaching*

For half a century, researchers have been arguing about the importance and urgent implementation of creative teaching (Rhodes, 1961 and Torrance, 1963). Creative teaching and learning is seen as a tool of developing social and individual progress and the classroom is a perfect environment to start from (Cropley, 2009; Runco, 2004).

Despite the common use of the term “Creativity” in education, educators are not that familiar with all the scientific research conducted on this issue (Franklin and Theall, 2007). Considering the fact that there is a lot of research conducted in this area, there are various definitions regarding creativity and creative teaching. Hoyt (as cited by Franklin and Theall, 2007) gives the following definition for creativity:

Creativity connotes originality, imagination, and expressiveness. While it is often associated with the fine arts and literature, it is often relevant to aspects of science, engineering, and other fields where design, research, and innovation are required. The instructional challenge is to help students to develop their creative potential. “Creativity” requires flexibility and divergence in thinking – new ways of thinking or expressing oneself; pursuing questions for which there is no single, correct answer. It implies a stretching and expansion of the students’ thoughts and ideas and the development of original insights. For these reasons, it often requires overcoming fear and encouraging self-confidence (p. 3).

Also, Ryhammar and Brolin (as cited by Franklin and Theall) provide an insightful definition of “creativity” by saying the following:

Creativity as a cognitive construct is multifaceted and has been represented from many perspectives as an aspect of intelligence, as problem solving ability, as an associative or even an unconscious process, and has also been connected to wide ranging constructs such as thinking in opposites, analogies and metaphors, intuition, inspiration, imagination, intelligence, various processes of mental representation, specific perceptions processes, and finding and solving problems.

According to Shneiderman (as cited by Franklin and Theall) there are also some pedagogical approaches to creativity that play a crucial role in establishing creative teaching and learning- creative classroom, such as: having adequate space and time; fostering self-esteem and self-worth; mentoring in creative approaches; involving learners in higher level thinking skills; encouraging the expression of ideas through a wide variety of media and means of expression; encouraging interdisciplinary integration of subject areas via topics that are meaningful and relevant to the learner.

Adams (as cited in Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching) believes that there are three components of creativity, such as: expertise, creative thinking skills and motivation (Figure 1). He claims that the creative person is naturally motivated (influenced by the work itself and not by any external factor) with a passion for his/her occupation. This motivation, supplementary to expertise and creative thinking skills, is essential to creativity.

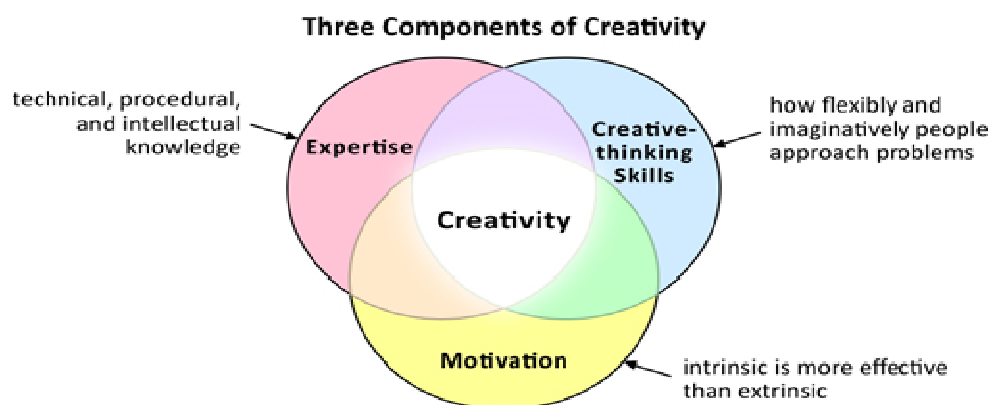


Figure 1. Adapted from Adams, K. "Sources of innovation and creativity: A summary of the research." Considering the above mentioned perceptions and definitions on creativity and creative teaching, it is important to discuss the characteristics of a creative teacher and a creative student. The creative teacher is perceived as the one who takes risks and inspires students to do the same through creative tasks. Despite the friendly rapport to be established between the teacher and the students (in order to have a class with a motivating atmosphere), the teacher must have a good scientific background as well. Moreover, it is essential to help students in terms of self-confidence, their diversity of ideas and their active role in explaining/discussing on challenging issues. Furthermore, the teacher should also be open-minded towards ambiguities, self-critical of his/her performances and expressive of creative abilities (Fautley & Savage, 2007; Fleith,2000; Cropley,1999). Additionally, the creative student is perceived as the one who possesses originality and imagination, is flexible and fluent (Guilford, 1986; Runco, 2003).

1.2. *Several Creative Teaching Techniques*

Many techniques on creative teaching have emerged throughout time. The most common ones are: Assumption Busting, brainstorming, negative (or reverse) brainstorming, concept mapping, role-playing, storyboarding, Do It, random input, decision tree, questioning activity, slip writing, laddering, exaggeration, brain-sketching, reversal, fishbone, the mystery spot, simulations, games (Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching). Also, creativity and innovation techniques are classified into categories and subcategories, such as in Figure 2:

Categories	Subcategories
Problem Definition	Planning, Boundary Examination, CATWOE, Chunking, Do Nothing, Five Ws and H, Multiple Redefinition, Other Peoples Definitions, Paraphrasing Key Words, Why Why Why.
Idea Generation	Brainstorming, Talking Pictures
Idea Selection	Anonymous Voting, Consensus Mapping, Idea Advocate, NAF, Sticking Dots.
Idea Implementation	Turning the refined ideas in reality.
Processes	Creative Problem Solving-CPS, F-R-E-E-Writing, Productive Thinking Model, Reciprocal Model, Synetics, Thinkx

Figure 2. Adapted from http://www.mycoted.com/Category:Creativity_Techniques

2. **Present study**

Outlined below are the results of the author's case study on using creative methods in an EFL classroom undertaken during the spring semester 2013.

2.1. *Research questions*

Research Question 1: What are the benefits of using creative methods of teaching in an EFL classroom?

Research question 2: What are the downfalls of using creative methods of teaching in an EFL classroom?

2.2. *Methodology*

Twenty EFL students from different departments of the SEE University-Tetovo, Macedonia aged between 18 and 21 years participated in this case study; they all attended Academic English course at the Language Center.

2.3. *Instruments*

The data was collected with the help of a lesson plan (see Appendix A) for an Academic English class and Class Observation Feedback Form (available upon request at jeta.rushidi@seeu.edu.mk) filled in by two observers.

2.4. *Procedure*

The procedure conducted for answering the research questions consisted of preparing a lesson plan for a specific class and the same class was observed by two professors. In this way objective answers and conclusions could be drawn regarding the advantages and disadvantages of using creative methods of teaching in an EFL classroom. Below outlined and explained is the lesson plan and the elaboration of the creative techniques used in this particular class. The techniques used were: free writing combined with suggestopedia, group discussion-comparing and contrasting graphic organizers, group assignment/project, and group presentation.

2.4.1. *Elaboration of the Lesson Plan*

The aims of the session were to make students recall and review the literary terms/elements and character traits as important aspects of character analysis; and 2) encourage students to interpret the literary terms/elements and character traits when analysing a character.

The objectives of the session were: by the end of the lesson all students should be able to: 1) demonstrate/illustrate various literary terms and give a thorough analysis of a character within a piece of literature; 2) identify and apply the literary elements used by the author to describe the character; and 3) create a visual interpretation of the character's traits (while creating the Character T-Shirt). Whereas, by the end of the lesson some students should be able to: 1) apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts.

2.4.2. *Structure of the lesson*

Warm up activity (8 minutes)

This is a preparatory stage in which students are helped to relax and move into a positive frame of mind, with the feeling that the learning is going to be easy and fun. The teacher tells students to make four groups and gives each group a name of one of the Gulliver's voyages. Group #1: Lilliput; Group #2: Brobdingnag; Group#3: Laputa; Group#4: Houyhnhnms. When the groups are set, the teacher instructs students to listen to the music in the background (which lasts 3 minutes) and write down a couple of sentences in the first person thus imagining they are Gulliver and describe the emotional and psychological state of the character (by activating all senses). When the music finishes, each group chooses one person to read. (Since it is a warm up activity, not all students read their writing however, all of them will do this individually as homework as an assignment stated in the syllabus).

Group discussion -Comparing and contrasting Character Analysis Graphic Organizers- (10 minutes)

Using the novel, 'Gulliver's Travels', the teacher tells students to remain working in groups and instructs them to compare and contrast their Character Analysis Graphic Organizers which they have filled in individually at home after reading the novel (critical reading) and to think critically. Students remain in the same groups and compare and contrast their Character Analysis Graphic Organizers thus discussing within the groups the literally elements regarding the main character of the novel, Gulliver. They brainstorm, gather and share information within the groups.

Group Project-Character Analysis T-Shirt Project - (15 minutes)

The teacher introduces the Character T-shirt handout. Also, shows how an understanding of literary elements dealing with character was needed in order to create it. The teacher goes over instructions with the class and explains that they should analyse Gulliver according to the 4 different voyages. Each group has to focus on one voyage only. The teacher allows students to begin creating their Character T-shirt. This project is completed in class within a time constraint. At this stage, students exhibit their ability to analyze a specific character "Gulliver" by creating a "Character T-Shirt." The teacher assigns roles to the students at this point in order to make sure that everyone is engaged in the group work. Particular students within the group work on the front of the t-shirt (story title, author, character's name, picture of character, description of character). Others work on the right sleeve of the t-shirt (strengths of the character), the left sleeve (weaknesses of the character), and some work on the back of the t-shirt (internal/external conflicts, static, dynamic character, climax, figurative language).

Group Presentation (15 minutes)

The teacher instructs students to present their T-shirts in front of the class (where each group has 3 minutes the maximum). The teacher uses the Character Analysis T-Shirt Rubric in order to asses students based on their ability to analyze the chosen character. One of the students of each group has the T-Shirt on, and together as a group they present their project regarding their perception of the main character.

Homework (2 minutes)

The teacher instructs students to compose a written response to character analysis (which is a required assignment stated in the syllabus).

3. Findings

This part of the paper provides the details and analysis of the benefits and downsides of creative teaching based on the feedback from the observation.

3.1. *Stage 1: The warm up activity*

This activity made students think about the topic, create and develop ideas. In this way, the students could reflect upon the topic discussed. Free writing was used as a creative technique in order to generate many creative ideas and it was theme-based within a time frame/constraint of 3 minutes. Students simply began writing whatever came to their mind. The benefits of this technique were that identifying with the main character, proved to be a great mental incentive for the students to deeper engage themselves in understanding the structure of character analysis. It helped students to get involved in the upcoming task and to get into a flow. Also, while free writing, the students were focused on expressing their creativity rather than judging. So this technique activated their creative thoughts and it avoided making a difference between what was right and wrong. However, the downsides of this technique would be that not all students felt free to share their imagination and creativity with their classmates. Hence they tried to control their thoughts and they didn't feel like sharing their writing with the class. Also, writing is perceived as an intimidating process by most of the students (especially for those with lower language proficiency) and they refuse to write within a time constraint and share their writing. Free writing needs practice. Some of the students think of it as a difficult task at the beginning but once they start writing they cannot stop.

3.2. *Stage 2: Group discussion- comparing and contrasting*

During this stage students were gathering and sharing information, agreeing and disagreeing on literally elements regarding the main character, which was a sign that students were involved actively in the group discussion. Collaborative learning includes active learning thus students achieved better results rather than working individually. The downsides of this technique could be the fact that there is always a risk of students who are excessively dominant, excessively introvert students, and those who contribute a little. A mixture of such students in a group is sometimes problematic and difficult to handle.

3.3. *Stage 3: The T-Shirt Project (Group Project)*

Students were provided with the t-shirts, markers, papers, and glue. They started working together while creating the T-Shirt project. Particular students within the group worked on the front of the t-shirt (story title, author, character's name, picture of character, description of character). Others worked on the right sleeve of the t-shirt (strengths of the character), the left sleeve (weaknesses of the character), and some worked on the back of the t-shirt (internal/external conflicts, static, dynamic character, climax, figurative language) while one representative of each group was wearing the t-shirt.

The benefits of this activity were that all students got involved and were very active in the activity assigned. Students worked in groups and seemed very engaged and interested in the group work. Each group consisted of 5 students, which contributed to the spirit of cooperation and joint engagement in doing the task. However, the downsides of these techniques were that at times it seemed that some students needed somewhat clearer instructions regarding their projects, even though they completed the exercises successfully at the end. It is not easy to control group work in class, especially when a group work involves a lot of movement and when it is planned within time constraint.

3.4. *Stage 4: Group Presentation*

At this stage the teacher instructed students to present their T-shirts in front of the class and each group had 3 minutes the maximum. The presentation started in a chronological order (according to four different lands that Gulliver visits.) One of the students of each group had the T-Shirt on, and together as a group they presented their project regarding their perception of the main character. In order to assess students' ability to analyze a character, the teacher used the Character Analysis T-Shirt Rubric. Students presented successfully by referring to the notes written and stuck on the t-shirts. At this point they provided an insightful analysis of the character.

The benefits of having a group project and a group presentation are that students collaborate with each other. It is easier for them to start with the assignment compared to working individually. Also, by dividing the roles within the group and assigning tasks is easy to control the group work thus avoiding being uneven, lacking control, by assuring that there is coordination and preparation. However, the downsides of group projects would be that if only one student of the group fails in doing his/her part of the work, it affects all the group work and demotivates the group in general.

4. Conclusion

Considering all of the above, it can be concluded that creative teaching has to be conveyed in a comprehensible fashion, with a variety of exercises that give chance to the students for a practical touch to the issue covered in class. The learning atmosphere has to be highly non-threatening and rather friendly. The material should be delivered clearly and understandably, with a number of exercises and group work. Students should be given a

number of various activities through which they will be given the opportunity to both understand the structure of the topic discussed and have a hands-on, practical experience on the same topic. If the teaching is creative, the class will be enjoyable for students. I believe that a high level of performance of teaching, learning, monitoring of learner progress, classroom management, and resources lead to a creative class.

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Appendix A

LESSON PLAN

Course/Year:

Academic English,
 Summer Semester 2013

Date: 18.04.2013

Lecturer: Jeta Rushidi

Time: 12:00-12:50

Number of students: 20

Length of session: 50 minutes

Lecture	Practical session	Session in specialist room
→ Small Group session	Fieldwork	Other (please specify)

Aims: In this session I aim to:	
1.	Make students recall and review the literary terms/elements and character traits as important aspects of character analysis.
2.	Encourage students to interpret the literary terms/elements and character traits when analyzing a character.
Objectives:	
By the end of the lesson all students should be able to :	
1	Demonstrate/ illustrate various literary terms and give a thorough analysis of a character within a piece of literature.
2	Identify and apply the literary elements used by the author to describe the character.
3	Create a visual interpretation of the character’s traits (while creating the Character T-Shirt).
By the end of the lesson some students should be able to:	
1	Apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts.

Previous knowledge assumed:

In the previous session students have been introduced to, and discussed the literary elements and definitions in the worksheet “Understanding Character Analysis”, such as:

- character
- analysis
- characterization
- the difference between direct characterization and indirect characterization
- the difference between main character and minor character
- the difference between a static and dynamic character
- the various complications with which a character must deal
- the difference between internal conflict and external conflict
- the role of motivation within a character
- complications
- climax
- strengths and weaknesses of a character
- figurative language

Students have read the novel at home and have worked on the Character Analysis Chart thus providing evidence of the literary elements in the novel.

Resources:

Materials for the Teacher:	Materials for Students:	References/Bibliography:
Gulliver’s Travels novel plain white T-shirts, one for each group of students markers, cards, stripes of paper, glue activity sheets: 1. Literary Elements and Definitions 2. Character Analysis Graphic Organizer 3. Character Analysis T-Shirt Project Instructions 4. Character Analysis T-Shirt Rubric	a white plain t-shirt: provided by the teacher activity handouts: provided by teacher markers, paper, glue	http://www2.scholastic.com http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plan/responding-literature-%C2%97-character-analysis http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZGmTVXY0YU

STRUCTURE OF LESSON

*Approx time (mins)	Teacher activity	Student Activity
8 minutes	<p>Warm up activity: (involving free writing and Suggestopedia- A preparatory stage in which students are helped to relax and move into a positive frame of mind, with the feeling that the learning is going to be easy and fun).</p> <p>-The teacher tells students to make four groups and gives each group a name of one of the Gulliver's voyages. Group #1: Lilliput; Group #2: Brobdingnag; Group#3: Laputa;Group#4:Houyhnhnms</p> <p>When the groups are set, the teacher instructs students to listen to the music in the background (which lasts 3 minutes) and write down a couple of sentences in the first person thus imagining they are Gulliver and describe the emotional and psychological state of the character (by activated all senses). When the music finishes, each group chooses one person to read. (Since it is a warm up activity, not all students read their writing however, all of them do it individually as homework as an assignment stated in the syllabus).</p> <p>Group discussion (comparing and contrasting Character Analysis Graphic Organizers)</p>	<p>-Ss sit in groups according to the teacher's instructions.</p> <p>-Ss compose a short paragraph while listening to the music and choose within the group the best composition and read it in front of the class.</p> <p>Each group reads a literary response regarding one voyage thus making space for a summary of the novel before getting into details regarding the character analysis.</p>
10 minutes	<p>Using the novel, 'Gulliver's Travels', the teacher tells students to remain working in groups and instructs them to compare and contrast their Character Analysis Graphic Organizers which they have filed in individually at home after reading the novel (critical reading) and to think critically.</p> <p>At this point, the teacher circulates round the classroom and makes sure that each student has filled in the graphic organizer at home. Also, the teacher checks if discussion is taking place and facilitates the work in groups as well.</p> <p>Character Analysis T-Shirt Project (Group Project)</p>	<p>-Ss remain in the same groups and compare and contrast their Character Analysis Graphic Organizers thus discussing within the groups the literally elements regarding the main character of the novel, Gulliver.</p> <p>-Ss Brainstorm, gather and share information within the groups.</p>
15 minutes	<p>The teacher introduces the Character T-shirt handout. Also, shows how an understanding of literary elements dealing with character was needed in order to create it. The teacher goes over instructions with the class.</p> <p>The teacher explains that that should analyze Gulliver according to the 4 different voyages. Each group focusses on one voyage only.</p> <p>The teacher allows students to begin creating their Character T-shirt. This project is completed in class within a time</p>	

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