

TEACHER'S CREATIVITY IN ELT

Suwartono

Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto, Indonesia
suwartono2006@yahoo.co.id

ABSTRACT

Creativity is considered an important thing to achieving success in any field of life, including English language teaching. In the teaching of English in Indonesia, where it is a foreign language, teachers' creativity is even more crucial. This paper highlights the significance of teacher's creativity in English language teaching, suggests approaches to developing teachers' creativity, and shares examples of classroom practices, notably their use of creativity in English language teaching.

Key words: *teacher, creativity, English language teaching.*

The essential role of a teacher is to help learning to happen. For this to be done, a teacher plays certain roles. One popular role is teacher as facilitator. This role is crucial because, when learning takes place, students are basically being engaged with problems. Therefore, teachers need to create an environment conducive for their students to learning. Unfortunately, in playing such a role, a teacher is not always successful. One thing worth taking into account is creativity.

It is fair to say that creativity is an important factor in achieving success, including success in English language teaching/ELT. As a foreign language, English is neither easy to learn nor to teach. English teachers need to be creative in an effort to create an environment for their students to learn in. This paper highlights the significance of teacher's creativity in English language teaching, suggesting approaches to the development of teachers' creativity, and sharing examples of classroom practices, notably the expression of creativity in ELT, based on the author's own teaching experience, research career, and teacher training, as well as workshop-tours.

The author's interest in teachers' creativity was triggered by his noticing that most of the participants in his teacher training and workshops had very limited insights into ELT methodology, classroom activity, media, and resources. For example, a talk about the use of games in English classes often provoked an argument. Some trainees strongly disagreed with the use of games in English classes because it was time-consuming. Later discussion and feedback opened their eyes to the relevance of games in a classroom situation. It seemed that their attitude had been generally rooted in ignorance due to low motivation in nurturing professional development. In peer teaching sessions of in-service teacher training, the activities the trainees brought to the class predominantly involved merely listening to the teacher. Most pre-service teacher training students who had had teaching practice at schools voiced issues consistent with this upon returning to campus.

Before going any further, it is better to discuss what is meant by teacher's creativity here. Creativity itself is actually a complex notion. It depends upon the ability to analyze and evaluate situations and to identify novel ways of responding to them. This in turn depends upon a number of different abilities and levels of thinking. That is why, a teacher's creativity can *inspire* other teachers. However, two creative teachers may do the same thing in different ways.

It is interesting to discuss what characterizes creative teachers. Creative teachers are in some ways similar. Richards in his online article mentions that creative teachers possess the following qualities: (1) creative teachers are knowledgeable; (2) creativity in teachers requires their possessing confidence; (3) creative teachers are committed to helping their learners succeed; (4) creative teachers are non-conformists; (5) creative teachers are familiar with a variety of strategies and techniques; (6) creative teachers are risk-takers; (7) creative teachers seek to achieve learner-centered lessons; (8) creative teachers are reflective.

With regard to those qualities mentioned above, here are the author's brief personal opinions. Creative teachers learn a lot from a variety of sources. With all their knowledge and efforts, they tend to enjoy *trying out* ideas in the class to help their students learn better. They do not feel worried about being different from what other teachers think or do, or – borrowing the term used in a classic work of Postman & Weingartner—"teaching as a subversive activity". They enjoy looking back at their own teaching practice, such as from notes (teaching journals), students' feedback (usually by getting them to scribble on a piece of paper, or questionnaires), video-recording, or colleagues' feedback (through observation).

From the discussion above it could be inferred that pre-service English teacher programs alone are not enough to generate creative English teachers. According to Brewster (2007) a few problems in initial English teacher education include: 1) an insufficiency of suitable training materials; 2) an inappropriate theory-practice balance; 3) trainers who are not sufficiently experienced in ELT; 4) insufficient demonstration, too much lecturing, too little participation; and curricula which are out-dated and out-of-touch with current world developments.

In addition to in-service teacher training, within their teaching career participants are also expected to continue with professional development, such as by actively taking part in workshops and conferences, extensively reading professional journals and proceedings in the field, and seriously participating in the events held by professional organizations. As far as the author is concerned, the teachers of English are weak in this matter, especially in their use of resources and participation in professional forums. The majority of them do not enjoy reading books and lack familiarity with journals and proceedings. Neither are they encouraged to attend professional development training forums and workshops. Often teachers attend forums merely for the sake of obtaining a certificate!

Journals and proceedings are superior to textbooks. Recent research findings and creative and *innovative* ideas are shared in journals, proceedings, as well as professional forums. Updated information contained in them could be very valuable and inspirational to teachers of English. Teachers' common excuse relates to the unavailability of text-books in the first year of the current curriculum implementation in this country; a situation conditioned by a lack of resources and access to information rich media. Only creative teachers could have *survived*

within such a scenario, as they could perform equally well with or without standardized material.

Like journals, conferences and symposiums are very valuable resources or accesses to the development and sharpening of teachers' creativity. For example, a university teacher of English shared her research finding. In her collaborative work with a colleague she conducted a team teaching and learning in her English class. She was very happy with her students' response to the team teaching and learning. Eighty-five per cent of the students stated that they preferred a class taught by a team having two members who were always present in the class instead of a team whose members come in turn. She was also excited to see the fact that with team teaching that adopted the Oral Presentation Approach both students and teachers were encouraged to collaborate amongst themselves, especially within their own groups cognitively – in getting knowledge by discussing the assigned readings, affectively – in developing empathy and friendships, and psychometrically – in preparing power points and operating the computer and LCD during the oral presentation. The teachers could share ideas and experiences, especially during the discussion after the students' presentations – which is actually the essence of team teaching.

Conferences and symposiums often include workshops given by some of the delegates. The practical experiences shared in these events are valuable and could be inspiring to other teachers of English. For example, one teacher shared an experience of innovative and effective strategies for teaching English. The teacher explained how to create a classroom climate in which students were eager to take risks and practice a new language. Or, a workshop given by another teacher who explained how to select/design/adapt/ materials and interactive activities to make students better motivated through imaginative, creative, and innovative teaching techniques suitable for productive learning.

Creativity in ELT can find itself expressed with regards to methodology, media, resources, material, classroom activities, or in some combination these. Nowadays, with the rapid advancement in ICT, teachers are challenged to make use of computer and internet in ELT. Research has reported that English teaching and learning has become more practical, "appetizing", efficient, and effective with technology. However, it requires a lot of *open-mindedness* and *curiosity* in the part of teachers. Besides open-mindedness and curiosity, at times, creativity needs *imagination* and/or *problem-solving* skill too. The following are actual, more detailed examples of teacher's creativity in ELT.

First of all, the use of dubbing to help students learn English sounds. Teaching pronunciation using drills so far has not been fruitful. Even though during the teaching and learning process student involvement was apparent, in fact, the learning outcome was less than what was expected. It seemed that a new, more subconscious teaching technique was necessary to help them learn.

The author considered the using film dubbing, similar in form to karaoke in music, as a way of indirectly getting students to develop phonic skills. Within the context of dubbing, the individual was to memorize and concentrate on the verbal and non-verbal behavior of the film artist whose voice he/she was dubbing. The process required a degree of reflection in that the dubber was to produce "professional" voice – one sounding like that of the original speaker. The "Dubbing Group" students learned in a fun and exciting context which resulted in their

developing better pronunciation skills, even though statistically the result showed insignificant difference compared to that of "Drill Group" students.

On another occasion, the author employed songs as media to help students learn English connected speech. Connected speech is an important aspect in the pronunciation of English. Mastering this aspect will not only improve the speaker's fluency and give positive impression of the speaker to the listener, but also help him/her comprehend the overall language better.

In relation with English connected speech, the writer considered that songs could be quite helpful. One argument is that some songs, different from films, are so slow that recognizing how the words flow becomes easier. Beat in songs and music in general makes it possible for speech to be easier to apprehend in spite of the speed of the speech. Initially inspired by this part "And I..." of a song entitled *will always Love You*, as a teacher the author selected and explored some songs material for this purpose.

The students taught English connected speech have benefited from the use of songs as the teaching media. Their perception toward the lesson was better than that of 'Drill' Group students. The rates were 70.8% for "Song Group" students and 59.5% for their counterparts. According to the open-ended questionnaire, students' impressions toward the use of media were likely to make up around 57% of the total feedback given by the Song students. Based on the statistical analysis, the gains of both sample means were, however, insignificant.

Another example of teacher's creativity is shown in the following collaborative work. An English teacher of a private vocational school in a district in central Purwokerto came by to consult her students' motivational problems when following English 'structure' lessons. She complained that her students were passive, while structure was predominantly taught in the school subject.

With regard to student poor participation, the author suggested the use of songs as alternative media to promote the students' participation in the class. The use of media can develop student learning interest and motivation. With adequate learning interest it can be expected that student participation is not just class attendance. The students will have enough energy to avoid giving negative response to classroom activities. Songs have rhythm and authenticity. These features in songs present fun to the listeners. When students feel excited to learn, their learning participation develops.

As authentic material, songs motivate the listeners to repeat the lyrics either wholly or partially. Furthermore, song lyrics contain samples of language in use, including sentence patterns. Let us consider, for example, the expressions 'I don't wanna see you crying', or 'I'll never let you go'. Within its context such an expression can be brought into the classroom when a teacher intends to introduce the sentence patterns that use verbs of senses and special verbs like *let*, *make*, etc. Sari (2009) points out the power of songs for teaching the grammar of a language.

The collaborative work has indicated a positive effect of the intervention implemented in the lesson. Based on the data analysis, there was a trend of improvement in both student learning participation as well as achievement.

The next example might be the greatest instance of creativity evinced by the author in the teaching of English pronunciation. Suprasegmentals, such as stress and connected speech, are

worthier of attention mainly because these features contribute heavily to intelligibility in spoken English and convey better impression of the speaker (O'Neal, 2010). Apart from the significance of these features, several problems emerged during the author's pronunciation teaching: uninteresting lesson, lack of listening-to-model activity prior to production practice, greater portion of teacher's talk, and too much drill.

In an effort to solve the problems, reflective learning method with video as a reflective tool incorporated into oral communicative language activities was adopted. Reflective learning with video was hoped to enable the students to self-monitor and self-evaluate their own speech performance. They were able to modify their behavior accordingly, either in isolation or with support of teacher and/or peers. Facial expressions and gestures that often accompany accented utterances were of special interest to students. Students' pronunciation class activity during the lesson covered rehearsing monolog or dialog, video recording, replaying, and revising. In this way, the students could be motivated to learn by internal rewards, such as increased self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment. Above all, the method could be done autonomously by the students outside the classroom.

An outside class pair-work conversation recording made by two very weak students on one occasion, for example, contained mostly accented and connected utterances of English. On another occasion, another couple of students even managed to use intonation, stress, and connected speech almost perfectly through their outside class conversation video clips. With this improved use of intonation, stress, and connected speech, most students' pronunciation of English was to some extent no longer strong in Indonesian or Javanese accent. Their utterances in monotones were ameliorated; meanwhile, melodies of varying kinds became more often heard, with rising and falling intonation. In other words, the students' pronunciation to some degree sounded "more English"/foreign-accented.

Some writers argue that writing cannot be taught. It can only be learnt. Others argue that a good writer is one who is a good reader. In fact, the experience of teaching academic writing is felt to be the most challenging and energy-consuming work by the author. Initially, the academic writing class had begun with a presentation of patterns and dictions/terms/phrases most commonly used in academic writing. When writing activity began students showed no positive response to it. When given chance to ask questions, they tended to keep quiet. When they were being monitored or their writing product was evaluated, almost nothing or very little was written. They just found it hard to get started, let alone to write properly.

To solve the problem above, an academic writing class that offered relevant activities, minimized teacher's domination, provided students with greater opportunity to write, and encouraged them to get involved in writing activity was required. As UNESCO (2001) writes, "People learn best when they are directly involved in all aspects of their learning". In line with that, Dryden and Vos (1999) makes the point that most complex knowledge can be best absorbed and memorized by learners if they learn with full involvement.

The author this time tried out a teaching model named *social inquiry*, which is suggested for use in the social studies. This teaching model gives an emphasis on problem-solving. Another characteristic is the open climate of discussion. Students are provided with an opportunity of making use of most possible sources in/outside schools. In the context of ELT, this teaching

model is expected to help students inquire about or search for facts about academic writing, including its corresponding linguistic dimensions, and then communicate the results of the inquiry within the classroom. There came an idea to give students a project-based and library work assignment. The students, in pairs, were asked to write an article based on their mini-project and writing task as if they had been an author and a co-author. They were invited to make a presentation and receive feedback from peers and teacher.

Through such a teaching and learning process, writing lesson was no longer tiring and time-consuming to either students or teacher, at least in the classroom. One clear, powerful impact of this social inquiry teaching model on the academic writing teaching course was that the students seemed to get involved in the class activity. Was it because they learnt by doing?

The next example of creativity in ELT was based genuinely on the author's ideas and experiences as a teacher, and partly on his survey. An example of common poor ELT practice is a reading comprehension class in which the teacher gets the students to produce oral or written answers to a series of 'wh' questions that follow a reading passage. It is too demanding, as reading comprehension is receptive, so students should not respond far beyond comprehension. It is enough for them to show a choice among options provided. When the choice is right then it is assumed that the students comprehend the text. In a classroom teaching and learning context, this even could be simplified by modifying the options-based test item in such way that students find it appealing.

Many language learning activities, mainly those related to receptive language skills and knowledge, can be presented using options-based tasks. Generally speaking, with options students have choice. With choice they feel secure. The first type of modified options-based task is the multiple-choice technique. With this technique, the teacher helps students get the right answer (e.g. search for meaning of new words in authentic materials) by providing the students with options that include both key and distracters they are already familiar with. By doing so, the teacher helps the students attend to meaning without telling them directly. This somehow supports inquiry learning.

Other modifications of objective test items for classroom ELT are possible. While, normally, matching test items are presented complete with distracters (B list is longer than A list) in tests, for classroom teaching and learning purpose the matching test item is intentionally presented without distracters (A list is the same in length as B list) to attract students to complete tasks. With this matching technique, the students spontaneously draw lines connecting entries within both lists. Included in this technique are completion exercise in which options are provided in the box, identifying pictures while listening, and sticking labels under pictures. What might be matched might include synonymous words, antonyms, words and definitions, words and pictures, etc.

On a smaller scale, there are other examples that reflect the teacher's creativity in ELT. To raise students' interest in learning pronunciation, the author has once in a while used a game illustrated as follows:

1. Two groups of five to seven students are asked to stand in line (usually through classroom aisles).
2. The two "head" students are asked to listen (using the headset) to the speaker on the recording at the front.

3. The two groups compete by trying hard to whisper the word heard by the head student across the members to the tail student.
4. The competition is scored on the basis of speed and/or accuracy.

It has always been exciting and challenging. Quite often the author should wait a minute before proceeding with the next step.

Since too many to mention here, the last example is derived from the author's experience as a certified TEFL TESOL Trainer of Trainer. As a variation, when introducing descriptive texts, once in a while the class was challenged to go through a cooperative learning. Tools/aids/media, namely several pieces of large drawing papers, color markers, and copies of text had been prepared. The class was split into groups of 3 – 5 students. Each group was given a copy of text, a paper, and markers with different colors. It was timed. They drew a picture after or while reading the text. On completion of the task, the picture was stuck on the wall near their joining seats. Usually, a little noise and laughter broke down at this point. Two or three members of each group with notes should leave to visit "neighbors" for information sharing. Quite often, they were involved in debate and managed to settle it when referring to the text. Reading comprehension and speaking were supposed to develop well and excitingly this way. All domains in individuals were supposed to be activated!

To sum up, overall, our teachers of English are not/less creative. Here are some alternative suggestions for this condition:

1. Teachers' creativity in English language teaching is important in order to help the students learn better.
2. Some important words/phrases related to teachers' creativity are knowledgeable, confident, experimenting, imaginative, open-minded, curious, problem-solving.
3. Teachers of English should develop and sharpen their teaching creativity by nurturing their professional development.
4. Teachers of English should familiarize themselves with journals or periodicals and read them a lot to explore information or insights into and development of recent ideas and research findings.
5. Teachers of English should actively take part in conferences, symposium, seminars, trainings, and workshops. Such activities open the opportunity for or access to direct and intensed communication with better experienced colleagues as to obtain practical ideas and experiences.
6. Practical experiences have been shared in this paper. These could be inspiring and are, of course, subject to adjustment.

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