

ON HOW TO BE A CREATIVE TEACHER FOR GEN Z LEARNERS

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Motto: Imagination is more important than knowledge.
(Albert Einstein)

Abstract

In a world dominated by cutting-edge technology which can provide quick answers to anyone's enquires, teaching needs to become more creative and innovative than ever before, in order to shape the young generation for future development. There is a consensus that teachers should encourage learners' creativity; however, they cannot expect creativity from their students unless they practise it themselves. This article focuses on identifying what makes a creative teacher in the language classroom. It starts by mapping the territory of investigation; that is, by scrutinising the literature on the topic with the aim of clarifying what "creativity" means, and why it is important in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language. The theoretical considerations are followed by some practical suggestions on how teachers can develop their own creative thinking skills as well as build a classroom atmosphere that fosters creativity. The conclusion is that creative teachers are the ones who perform their duties with passion, discipline and an eye on constant innovation.

Key words: creativity, innovation, learning, teaching, technology.

Rezumat

Într-o lume dominată de tehnologie de ultimă generație care oferă răspunsuri rapide la orice întrebare, procesul de predare trebuie să devină mai creativ și mai inovativ decât a fost vreodată, pentru a pregăti dezvoltarea viitoare a tinerei generații. Există un consens referitor la faptul că profesorii ar trebui să încurajeze creativitatea studenților. Cu toate acestea, ei nu pot pretinde creativitate din partea studenților dacă ei înșiși nu o demonstrează. Articolul de față urmărește să identifice ce reprezintă un profesor creativ la orele de limbi străine. Pentru început, se trece în revistă literatura de specialitate cu scopul de a clarifica ce înseamnă „creativitate” și de ce este importantă în procesul de predare/învățare a unei limbi străine. Considerațiile teoretice sunt urmate de sugestii practice referitoare la modul în care profesorii pot să își dezvolte aptitudinile de gândire creativă și să creeze o atmosferă care încurajează creativitatea la clasă. Concluzia este că profesorii creativi sunt cei care își fac meseria cu pasiune, disciplină și atenție sporită spre inovarea constantă.

Cuvinte cheie: creativitate, inovare, învățare, predare, tehnologie.



Introduction

The increasing speed of globalisation backed by a rapid development of technology has changed to a great extent the way people work, think, live, or communicate. Economist Richard Baldwin speaks of the “Globotics” trend that characterises the current era, as a combination of globalisation and robotics that heavily impacts all sectors of work (Baldwin, 2019). From this perspective, it is evident that the entire 21st- century discourse on knowledge and competence is shaped by the advance of digitalisation and the myriad of learning opportunities that it offers. Today’s unprecedented technological development has clearly been shaped by human creativity, and provides the input for further innovation and creative ideas.

It is no surprise that modern education, deeply connected to the evolution of society and its needs, must embrace digital technology, along with the interest in creativity. However, creative thinking is not a new target in education. Over the past few decades, it has been encouraged in the foreign language classroom, being widely perceived as a “good thing” that enriches the quality of life and the process of learning (Maley, 2015: 6). What is new is the urge to develop learners’ creative and innovative skills, that is, higher order thinking skills, since these are in great demand on the work market.

Studies have stressed the importance of designing creative activities, using teaching materials in a creative way, laying the foundations for a creative classroom atmosphere, or inventing new, appealing ways of teaching grammar, for instance. Our intention is to shift the focus from the learner to the teacher, starting from the assumption that he/she always acts as a role model. Nowadays, perhaps more than ever, English teaching professionals need to leave the comfort of their routine, the safety area of books and dictionaries, the stuffy certainties, and embrace change. If they are to foster creativity in their classes, they themselves should possess creative thinking skills, along with an open-mindedness to innovation and personal reinvention in the profession. As Alan Maley points out, “If we want our students to sing, we must sing too. If we want them to act and mime, we must act and mime too. If we want them to write poems or stories, or to draw and paint, then we must engage in the same activities as they do.” (Maley, 2015: 7) It is the only way in which the teacher can relate to the “digital natives” of Generation Z and their learning needs and



expectations. In this article, we briefly review the literature on the topic in order to clarify what creativity is, and to outline its importance in the process of teaching and learning. We shall then focus on the teacher and analyse how he/she can become creative and inspire creative thinking in his/her students.

Defining creativity

We all recognise creativity when we meet it without previously doing any research on the subject, which implies that a definition of the creative process is elusive, or virtually impossible. Creativity is generally perceived as a personal gift or quality; therefore, some people are more creative than others. In this light, Teresa Amabile points out that: "The major emphasis in creativity research over the past three decades has been on personality studies of creative individuals." (Amabile, 2018: 4) Indeed, cognitive perspectives link creativity to individuals: "Creativity means a person's capacity to produce new and original ideas, insights, restructurings, inventions, or artistic objects, which are accepted by experts as being of scientific, aesthetic, social, or technological value" (Vernon, 1989: 94). This interpretation identifies three key concepts in the definition of creativity: originality, value and expert approval. The public recognition of value by experts has informed socio-cultural perspectives on creativity. Thus, it is the experts who decide whether a "product" is creative or not, and this expert judgment brings in the social and cultural dimension of the process (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Related to this idea, Wyse and Ferrari underline that creativity is also linked to a particular field and its validation depends on the specialists in that field: "In this systems view of creativity the individual person uses the signifiers of the given domain (such as music, engineering, business, mathematics) to generate a new idea which has to be recognised as being creative by the field" (Wyse & Ferrari, 2014: 32).

Another common perception of creativity is that it always implies something new, an element of novelty. Creativity is indeed the process of creating new ideas, but researchers have pointed out that an outcome will not be recognised as creative unless it is useful (Maley, 2015; Runco & Jaeger, 2012). Runco and Jaeger underline the idea that "original things must be effective to be creative" (Runco & Jaeger, 2012: 92), and they identify several forms of "effectiveness", such as *usefulness*, *fit*,

appropriateness, or *value*. This echoes older theoretical approaches which considered that creativity requires “effective surprise” (Bruner, 1962: 18), that creative things must be “worthwhile” (Cropley, 1967: 67), or “appropriate” (Jackson & Messick, 1965: 313).

The novelty element brings creativity close to discovery and invention. Addressing the possible confusion between the terms, Maley explains that discovery means accidentally finding something that has already been there, as it was the case of the phenomenon of gravitation discovered by Isaac Newton (Maley, 2015: 7). By contrast, invention refers to a unique product, process or method that did not previously exist, such as a painting, the wheel, the light bulb, or pasteurisation. Therefore, it can be argued that invention is triggered by human creativity. The difference between the two consists in the fact that creativity is the ability to generate new, imaginative ideas, while invention puts those ideas into practice. In other words, creativity is a mental process, whereas invention is a tangible outset. Together, they form the foundation of innovation.

Why to focus on creative thinking in teaching

The main goal of education is to prepare students for life and work, that is, to provide them with adequate skills to apply knowledge, find solutions, take decisions, and interact with their peers. Creativity helps us deal with change, with unforeseen situations; therefore, it is essential for survival. Building creative thinking skills has thus become a main concern in the process of teaching and learning. On the other hand, the Generation Z students have very specific learning needs. Growing up in the era of smartphones and social media, they rely excessively on digital technology. The “digital natives” (Prensky, 2010) are exposed to vast amounts of information to which they have instant access at any time; they interact on social media, having various networks of virtual friends; their experiences altogether are very different from those of previous generations. Moreover, the “two-dimensional world of only sight and sound” has turned into “a place of nagging anxiety or triumphant exhilaration as you are swept along in a social networking swirl of collective consciousness” (Greenfield, 2015: 13). All these impact the way students think, feel, learn and live. Hammad stresses the idea that: “Generation Z learners’ ability to access and transmit information quickly has significantly impacted their preferred mode of



learning. Their learning is defined by speed, nonlinear processing, effective use of technology, multitasking, individualism, and personalized performance.” (Hammad, 2025: 214) According to recent surveys, Generation Z students see themselves as smart, creative and hardworking (Adobe, 2016). From this perspective, it is obvious that, since technology and creativity are part of their identity and lifestyle, the learners expect more focus on creativity in their studies.

Once students are engaged in creative activities, learning becomes an enjoyable process which is meant to enhance their motivation. The motivational factor becomes a good reason to let students express themselves in a free, creative way. Moreover, this freedom of speech will boost students’ self-esteem and confidence in their abilities. If they are given space to use their creativity, they will feel more enthusiastic to take part in class activities, and this will be beneficial for their long term memory.

Speaking a language is a creative process in itself. The linguistic creativity is seen at all levels of competence, from the utterance of simple sentences, to the different ways in which students can retell a story, or play a role on a stage. Likewise, learning a foreign language involves flexible thinking and the use of imagination to acquire new linguistic norms and cultural values, moving beyond memorisation to active production. The diversity of the output proves that there is never a single, correct answer, but rather a diversity of possible answers. Creativity turns language acquisition into a dynamic, positive and personally relevant experience which encourages divergent thinking.

Such an experience will take place and become fully enriching in an environment that makes creativity and experimentation with language possible. Maley points out that: “Creative thinking cannot be purchased, downloaded or guaranteed but it can be fostered with the right environment.” (Maley, 2015: 6) The ideal atmosphere in the classroom is one of trust and freedom of speech. Students need to know that their opinions will not be judged, that they have the opportunity to question traditional views as well as to learn to accept and value the others’ contributions, to take risks without the fear of shame or failure. Such environments shift the teacher’s role from a “controller” to a “facilitator” of learning. At the same time, in the context of Generation Z learners who



spend most of their time online, a relaxed classroom environment becomes the perfect space for real communication and socialisation, a “healthy” alternative to the digital space.

Creativity in education has widely been perceived as enriching the quality of learning. Nowadays, more than ever before, teachers need to be very creative in their teaching since they address the Generation Z learners who want to break free from any old patterns of studying. In English language teaching, creative thinking is a recent concern which mirrors the shift from an over-reliance on certain methods and approaches to the focus on mental processes that lie beneath a more effective learning of foreign languages. Moreover, creative thinking and linguistic acquisition are two faces of the same coin. Marisa Constantinides explains that “language acquisition can benefit from activities developing this aspect of higher order thinking, just as creativity itself benefits from language use and L2 learning opportunities” (Constantinides, 2015: 115).

In spite of the fact that both teaching professionals and institutions are aware of the importance of building creative skills, the education system ethos does not nurture creativity. This is largely because of prescribed curricula, the widespread use of standardised tests, the focus on measuring efficiency in statistical terms, or the obsessive following of short-term objectives to the detriment of broader educational goals (Maley, 2015: 6). Moreover, the status quo is maintained by old practices and habits of thought that add to the teaching inertia (Simpson & all, 2022: 163). There are voices who blame it all on low funding and the scarcity of resources. Indeed, learners are used to and expect technology in the language classroom, but research shows that teachers do not necessarily need the latest equipment in order to develop their students’ creative potential. Teaching is primarily a human experience (Greenfield, 2015: 209) and an open-minded teacher, willing to embrace change and break free from inertia, will know how to use the most important resource which consists of the students themselves.

Teachers’ creative thinking skills

As we have already mentioned, teachers need to develop their own creative skills, firstly because they act as role models, and secondly because they address a generation of learners who find creativity highly



motivating. Specialist literature has emphasised that creativity is not a single ability, but a cluster of intellectual abilities which can be taught and learned (Seelig, 2012). One such ability is problem-solving that teachers need in their daily activity. In her analysis of the reasons why teachers need to be creative, Marisa Constantinides (2015: 115-116) points out that, in the absence of creative thinking skills, teachers:

- may not be flexible in their thinking;
- may not be able to find solutions to problems, or deal with unexpected situations in the class;
- may strictly follow a coursebook, without making the necessary changes in order to fit the lesson objectives and to meet the specific needs of their students;
- may depend solely on methods, approaches, institutional requirements, and other people's ideas;
- may be unable to develop their own value system and their own philosophy of education based on their teaching experience;
- may teach uninteresting lessons, demotivate students, and ultimately obtain poor results.

By contrast, a creative teacher will avoid all of the above and greatly benefit from flexible, independent thinking, high originality, problem-solving capacity, as well as great productivity.

From our own experience as teachers and former students, we know that not all teachers are creative, and the question which arises is: "What prevents them from being creative?" The reasons emphasised by researchers are linked to various constraints:

- **educational background.** Most teachers, at least in Romania, studied in a traditional education setting, a system based on memorisation and a great deal of grammar practice. Thus, they could not develop any creative thinking skills during their study period, a fact which definitely left a mark on the type of teachers they have become.
- **curricula and institutional constraints.** A heavy curricula and the pressure of standardised exams leave no space for creativity. The test-taking culture prioritises one single right answer, thus reducing the opportunity to generate multiple solutions. Teachers have to focus on exam

preparation, and because of lack of time or fear of failure, they avoid other engaging, thought-provoking activities.

- **self-generated constraints.** There are teachers perceived as “rigid”, in the sense that they hold to their set of values and beliefs, and are not willing to step out of the well-trodden path of the tried and tested methods. On the other hand, teaching activities that involve creative thinking and imaginative solutions take time to prepare; hence, a teacher may feel reluctant to try them out in class. This is also the case with the latest technology, since there are teachers who avoid adopting it because they do not know how to use it. Lacking adequate training, they fear technical glitches during classes and are sceptical about the pedagogical value of new technology.

- **self-image constraints.** Teachers may say that they cannot sing or dance together with their students because they would feel embarrassed, too old, or too inadequate for such “childish” activities. They may also feel the urge to maintain a certain distance from students and to remain a figure of authority.

These constraints prove that the awareness of the key role of creativity in teaching is not enough to create creative teachers. In order to include creativity in the classroom, we need to start with the teachers and their training.

Practical suggestions for teachers

Starting from the assumption that teachers need to demonstrate their commitment to creativity, there are some principles that they can follow in order to develop their own creative thinking skills.

Curiosity

Learning and creativity begin in the mind of a curious individual. Curiosity seeks for new information, for answers, for solutions to problems, representing the starting point of any creative act. In this context, teachers should ask themselves when they stopped asking questions, or why curiosity fades with time and experience. While reflecting on these questions, they should investigate where barriers for curiosity come from, and how they can motivate themselves to regain “lost” curiosity.



Elaboration

One step to creativity is to build on and develop existing ideas. Thus, old materials can be used in a different, more stimulating and effective way. For example, teachers can take a unit from a coursebook that they are familiar with, and try to devise as many new activities as possible to add to the activities in the unit. Alternatively, they can think of how to change an existing game (e.g. adding new rules, more players) to fit in with their lesson objectives, their students and the teaching context.

Materials curation

Instead of collecting materials and keeping them in boxes, teachers have now the possibility to find materials online and organise them in computer files. Curation can be defined as “the archiving and preservation of digital assets” (Constantinides, 2015: 122), and there are several great tools on the web that teachers can use to collect and curate materials, such as Diigo and Pinterest. The advent of AI has significantly broadened the area of online searching. Moreover, AI can be used to generate teaching materials, lesson plans, or activities on virtually any topic and for all levels of language competency. However, in a survey conducted by the British Council on the changes that occurred in the teaching and learning of English in the period 2014-2024, “AI scored lowest in terms of important topics that form part of teachers’ practice (30%), not surprising given the relative newness of the technology” (Motteram and Dawson, 2025:8). We strongly believe that AI is a tremendous source of information that can be used for creative purposes with great results.

Flexibility

An essential aspect of the creative process is the flow of various ideas. As an exercise, teachers can focus on a problem they have to solve and come up with as many solutions as possible, by putting themselves in different roles – teacher, student, director, fellow colleague. The “switching” between roles involves seeing a problem from different perspectives, rather than getting fixated on one approach, a fact that promotes divergent thinking and increases the originality of ideas. Knowing that there is no single, “right” answer to a problem encourages a different, more creative way of working. At the same time, as Marcu points out, “in order to get the most out of the teaching process, teachers



constantly have to change roles”, and in so doing, they are able to sympathise with their students (Marcu, 2021: 47).

Failing and Thriving

There is a consensus that teachers learn by trying and failing. Just as students make errors and learn from them, teachers need to be open to the possibility of getting things wrong. Failure is definitely part of the creative process. It involves reframing failures as important learning opportunities rather than personal shortcomings. A failure opens up new ideas about how things can be done differently and sets new goals for improvement.

The Group

One of the best ways to improve one’s creativity is to join a community. Connecting to others helps teachers find ideas and solutions more quickly, in ways they may have not imagined before. No one can be a “teacher-hero” in isolation. Constantinides points out that: “Learning is, after all, social. We learn best in groups and creativity is often sparked off in the presence and company of others.” (Constantinides, 2015: 122) Therefore, teachers are advised to discuss what they are doing with other teachers, to observe peers’ lessons and ask for someone to observe their classes, to register for training sessions, to attend seminars and conferences. At the same time, there is the possibility of joining online communities of teachers on social networking sites, teachers who share their experiences, ask questions, look for advice etc. Getting in touch with teaching professionals around the world and being exposed to different teaching styles and ideas, teachers can gain fresh perspectives to improve their teaching. In the end, the more connections teachers have, the more creative they become.

The mindset

Creativity should not be an occasional feature of some lessons, but a state of mind. Teachers need to develop a creative attitude which surfaces in everything they do, from daily teaching to problem solving in class. They need to remain open to variety and change, to be easily adaptable and “willing to ‘let go’ and to ‘have a go’ by trying things they have never tried before” (Maley, 2015: 7). The mindset is the engine of both classroom creativity and professional development. A teacher who has stopped learning and improving his/her skills is no longer a useful teacher. Jim Scrivener points out that: “In order to grow, we need to remain open to the



possibility of change. [...] It can feel safer to stay fixed, unmoving. But this means, week by week, hour by hour, we grow stale and our lessons grow tired.” (Scrivener, 2005: 372) Indeed, experience can kill creativity, in the sense that it creates routine, offers the safety of well-travelled roads and the comfort of risk-free learning environments. Yet, a good, useful teacher is one who keeps creating, driven by a constant desire to move forward.

Conclusions

Language teachers have the privilege of working with a vital and fascinating subject matter. Languages represent great sources of creativity and, at the same time, the way of expressing human creativity. From this perspective, there is a growing demand for more creative approaches to the teaching of languages. Teachers should bear in mind, at all times, that their goal is to prepare their students to function in society, that is, to communicate, to be able to solve problems, to take decisions, to successfully relate to other people. Creativity is an essential part in all these aspects; therefore, teachers should not be too focused on verb endings or the right prepositions. What is needed is a friendly environment where learners’ creative potential can flourish. In order to create this kind of atmosphere, teachers should focus on developing their own creative thinking skills through focused training, practice and continuous learning. In the end, it is a mindset of curiosity, flexibility, research and collaboration that fosters the development of teachers’ creative thinking skills.

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