

EFL Students' Perceptions of Creativity: A Case Study in an Indonesian University

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ABSTRACT

Creativity has been considered essential for success as a necessary component of 21st century learning and innovation skills. Many studies on teachers' and students' conceptions of creativity produced a variety of findings. In spite of these studies, research on students' conceptions of creativity is still worthwhile, especially when considering Indonesia. Increasing students' creativity through instructional activities has been the main focus of recent research on creativity in the Indonesian EFL context; however, it is crucial to remember that sound concepts of creativity should come before incorporating them into teaching practices.

This study attempts to shed light on EFL students' perceptions of creativity at an Indonesian university through case study research. The study involves 6 university students studying English as a foreign language (EFL) participated in a focus group interview used to elicit the students' conceptions of creativity. The results show students' conceptions are various but narrowly but closely aligned including novelty, idea generation, divergence, value, and product creation. The students also supposed that the creativity can be trained through instructions. Finally, the students arrange their creativity to deal with the academic tasks.

KEYWORDS: Creativity; Perception; English as a Foreign Language

INTRODUCTION

Creativity, as an essential component of 21st century learning and innovation abilities, has been seen as critical to success. Creativity is also valued as a crucial millennial ability in education (Akyıldız & Çelik, 2020; Huh & Lee, 2020; Kupers et al., 2019) to tackle challenges in both academic and personal contexts (Kettler et al., 2018) in an unpredictable and ever-changing time, as well as to address societal issues and the increasingly globalized world. Without innovation, global growth will quickly come to a standstill (Sternberg & Karami, 2022).

In the context of EFL teacher education, it is crucial to provide aspiring educators a firm grasp of the principles of creativity and the knowledge to cultivate it, especially with regard to creative flexibility during difficult times. Furthermore, how successfully instructors integrate creativity into

the classroom will depend on their level of creative belief (Bereczki & Kárpáti, 2018). Additionally, since teachers are the role models for creative people, they can foster creativity through their behavior (Akyıldız & Çelik, 2020). Instructors' definition and operationalization of creativity can also play a part in the different ways that creativity is fostered in classrooms (Andiliou & Murphy, 2010).

Past studies on how instructors and students conceptualize creativity have produced a variety of findings. To categorize teachers' perceptions of creativity in the context of Chinese EFL, for instance, four categories were used: innovative teaching tactics, cognitive progress, creative products, and freedom of expression (Wang & Kokotsaki, 2018). According to Kaufman & Beghetto (2013) and Puryear et al. (2017), creative concepts may be predicted by personality traits like agreeableness and openness. Zhu & Zhang (2011) also showed a substantial association between concepts of creativity and thinking styles. Research conducted by Aljughaiman and Mowrer-Reynolds (2005) revealed that educators have imprecise ideas about creativity and display hostility towards the actions of imaginative pupils.

A related study also shows that most educators do not include creative techniques into their lessons and are ignorant of the core idea of creativity (Akyıldız & Çelik, 2020). Teachers saw creativity to both support and contradict notions of creativity as adaptors and innovators, according to research by Galewski and Karwoski (2019). Neither of the first two courses' professors believed that creative kids were inventive, open-minded, or skilled problem solvers. Rather, those teachers tended to see them as disciplined and in control. The instructors of the final two classes have the opposite opinion. Another study similarly found that students' attribute creativity was highly affected by school atmosphere, which was mediated by motivation and a proactive personality (Gao et al., 2020).

In spite of these findings, research on students' ideas of creativity is still worthwhile, especially when considering Indonesia. Each culture may have an own perspective on creativity, and the sociocultural and historical background may influence how creativity is judged. Since circumstance defines creativity, the two are therefore inextricably linked. For example, something that is considered innovative in one setting may not be in another. According to Helfand et al. (2016), German educators performed the worst when it came to connecting creativity and intellect, whereas Chinese educators placed a high importance on divergent thinking. Furthermore, various disciplinary settings may define creativity differently (Georgiou et al., 2022).

Increasing students' creativity through instructional activities has been the main emphasis of current research on creativity in the Indonesian EFL environment; nonetheless, it is crucial to remember that sound notions of creativity should come before incorporating them into teaching methods. Higher education, on the other hand, emphasizes creativity far less, and particular programs often do not have creative aims (Jackson & Shaw, 2006; Marquis et al., 2017). This study is conducted to gain better understanding how EFL students at an Indonesian institution perceive creativity.

The term creativity is frequently used in educational contexts, yet the definitions offered by academics in education and psychology as well as educators tend to be ambiguous. The definitions of creativity may combine one or more elements, perhaps even in a contradictory way, to refer to a process, a person, a product, or a setting. Despite this elusiveness, most researchers agree that creativity comprises two core elements: novelty and task appropriateness (Helfand et al., 2016).

Fundamentally, scientists and educators agree that creativity is the ability to generate innovative work (original, surprising), yet also suitable such that the output matches the restrictions and criteria of a job at hand (Kaufman & Baer, 2004). Researchers are not the only ones who have differing views on creativity, according to studies on teachers' perceptions of creativity, instructors frequently work to foster students' creative potential in the classroom when they identify it, although they have diverse definitions for the term. Moreover, instructors often note the lack of focus on creativity in teacher education and have a constrained vision of innovation with stereotype-based attitudes (Davies et al., 2004). Additionally, although teachers typically appear to embrace creativity, the findings of certain studies (Beghetto, 2007) indicate that they have unfavourable views and limited tolerance for the behaviours and characteristics that are associated with it.

The word creative derives from 'to create' referring to bringing new ideas, thoughts, or things into existence. Creativity may mean different things to different people, but they have one common definition of creativity referring to producing something new. Creativity is concerned with the behaviour of an actor or group of actors, in its continual interaction with numerous audiences and the affordances of the material world, resulting in the development of new and valuable artefacts (Glăveanu, 2013). In other words, creativity is not merely an individual trait, yet is influenced by numerous factors involving personality, environment, culture, and social interaction. Richard, et.al (2021) synthesise the latest studies on creativity and then propose a framework to address the concept from a more holistic viewpoint. They split the elements of creativity into two main elements: the actor or person and the environment. The creative elements of the actor roots in their cognitive skills, affective attributes, and physical expression. On the other hand, the environmental elements entail the material world, micro-cultural values, and social interactions with others. Finally, creativity can also be categorised into different ways of understanding creativity based on experience in the context of teaching and learning: constraint- focused experience, process-focused experience, product-focused experience, transformation-focused experience, fulfilment-focused experience (Kleiman, 2008).

The earliest framework of creativity was insinuated in Mel Rhodes' 4P model of creativity, also known as the Four Ps of creativity, that describes the four key components that contribute to the creative process (Rhodes, 1961). The Four Ps of Creativity are Person, Process, Press, and Product. The "Person" component of Rhodes' model focuses on the individual characteristics and traits that influence creativity. It emphasises the personal qualities, skills, and attitudes that contribute to the creative process. This includes factors such as knowledge, expertise, cognitive abilities, personality traits, motivation, and perseverance. In addition to these factors, one's thinking styles and modifiability (Sternberg & Karami, 2022) can be considered as inseparable parts of 'person' component.

The Person component recognises that individual differences play a crucial role in shaping one's creative potential. The "Process" component, on the other hand, refers to the various cognitive and psychological processes involved in creativity. It involves the mental activities, strategies, and approaches that individuals use to generate, develop, and evaluate ideas. This component includes stages such as problem identification, information gathering, idea generation, idea evaluation, and implementation. It also encompasses divergent thinking (generating multiple ideas) and convergent thinking (evaluating and selecting the best ideas). The third component

"Press" emphasizes the environmental factors that influence creativity. It recognises that the context in which individuals operate can either facilitate or hinder creative thinking and expression, including factors such as social norms, cultural influences, organisational climate, support systems, available resources, and external constraints. Classified into two categories, positive press refers to environments that encourage and support creativity, while negative press refers to restrictive or discouraging conditions. The last component, the "Product" means to the outcomes or results of the creative process. It emphasises the tangible or intangible creations that emerge from a person's creative endeavours. Products can take various forms, such as artistic works, scientific discoveries, technological innovations, business ideas, and social inventions. The product component highlights the importance of evaluating and recognising the value and originality of the creative outputs.

Another prominent theoretical framework of creativity is the Four Cs model of creativity developed by Beghetto & Kaufman (2007). Both introduced the four Cs model of creativity entailing Big-c, little-c, mini-c, and pro-c creativity. The first category refers to eminent creativity that has a lasting impact on society, culture, or a particular domain, such as that demonstrated by groundbreaking artists, famous scientists, and world leaders. Little-c, on the other hand designates everyday creativity that is less eminent such as decorating room and colouring book. It involves the ability to generate creative ideas or solutions that are considered valuable or useful within a particular context. Little-c creativity is domain specific and often requires specialized knowledge or skills. However, the distinction between big-c and little-c creativity sparks criticism. Eminence or fame, although creativity contributes to these, cannot be equated with creativity since fame also requires things other than creativity such as persistence and confidence (Runco, 2014). In other words, not all famous people are creative and vice versa. Another problem with this distinction is that the creative process in the everyday and high-level achievement creativity is the same where the latter requires more extraneous elements that may result in social recognition. Little-c also has the potential to grow into big-c. Adding mini-c and pro-c does not seem to diminish this distinction. Mini-c itself is creativity process that helps people build their own knowledge and understanding (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007). Thus, mini-c is part of learning process that is intrapersonal. Mini-c refers to personal creativity, which is the creativity we express in our everyday lives. It involves the ability to generate novel ideas, perspectives, and solutions within our individual domains. Mini-c creativity can be seen in activities like brainstorming new ideas, finding unique ways to approach tasks, or expressing creativity through personal hobbies. The last c, pro-c describes successful professionals who have not reached eminence like the great. An example of this might be professionals such as sport coaches or academics who demonstrate high level of creative skills yet have not received high level of eminence.

In the context of higher education, creativity has been increasingly seen as an important attribute to students. Creativity is essentially needed because being creative is a fundamentally human quality, creativity is integral to being any kind of professional and outside of formal education, creativity is necessary for survival and success in a complex, unpredictable world (Jackson, 2006b). However, the absence of consensus in the conceptions of creativity remains, making it a challenge to be operationalized in the context (Egan et al., 2017; Georgiou et al., 2022). As reported by Jackson & Shaw (2006), academics conceptualized creativity as being imaginative, original, exploring for discovery, using and combining thinking skills and communication. Despite

these common and acknowledged general conceptions of creativity, encouraging creativity can be daunting since creativity may mean different things with respect to disciplinary perspectives. Therefore, for students to learn and be motivated to pursue their interests in the subject, higher education teachers need to be creative in how they connect knowledge, application and process skills, and disciplinary perspectives on the world to the needs and interests of their students (Jackson, 2006a). Furthermore, developing self- efficacy, encouraging risk-taking in secure surroundings, and assisting students in engaging with complex and unexpected circumstances where there are no right or wrong solutions are all essential components of learning processes that stimulate creativity in higher education.

RESEARCH METHOD

The participants of this study are six students who are taking EFL course in an Indonesian university. Meanwhile, data from this study were obtained through focus group interview. The focus group with voluntary participants was carried out to dig deeper on their perceptions and styles of creativity development. Questions regarding their creativity were addressed during the focus group interview including how they conceive creativity, describe themselves as a creative individual and past projects or tasks that require them to deploy their creative thinking skills.

In order to support the interview, an observation was carried out in two classes of students undertaking courses at the English language department in an Islamic state university situated in Nusa Tenggara. Meanwhile, interview data are descriptively presented and discussed to complement the quantitative data.

RESULTS

Participants' responses on what they perceive to be creative vary to a great extent. These results come from their responses to an open-ended question 'what does it mean to be creative?' Several responses are coded and grouped based on similar ideas based on certain key words. For instance, responses with key word 'new, innovation, discovery and original' are grouped into novelty. This classification is also applied for other key words that emerge from the responses such as 'different' or 'unique' grouped into divergence category. However, the participants occasionally reported more than one concepts, for example new and unique. For these occasional cases, we opt to pick the first key words used.

1. Students have various perception about creativity

From the report below, students' responses orchestrate top five conceptions of creativity including novelty, idea generation, divergence, value, and product creation. On the other hand, quite rare conceptions emerge such as creativity as problem solving, modification, talent and enjoyment. Data from the focus group interview highlights 2 similar conceptions as displayed above. These are highlighted in the following interviews:

"I think, a creative person can create something which is out of the box, meaning ideas offered are not conventional and commonly heard." (Student_01)

"In my opinion, creativity is essentially to have a different mindset. It also means problem solving. When one is coming across a problem, he gets stuck and gives up, the problem is not solved, but when one possesses a different mindset, he will come up with new solution." (Student_02)

"I think creativity means to have a high level of imagination." (Student_03)

"Basically, creativity is a way to create an alternative which is not necessarily in line with the existing and to express ourselves." (Student_04)

"A creative individual must have a unique trait compared to his peers. When being creative, he has enough skills to create new things." (Student_05)

"A creative person possesses a high level of curiosity." (Student_06)

2. Creativity can be taught

When asked about whether creativity is innate or can be trained most of the participants agree that it can be learned and fostered particularly through instructions.

"In my opinion, creativity is inherent because I have a friend of mine. Her father is creative, and his creativity is passed down to his children, but I think it can be learned." (Student_05)

"I think creativity can be trained. In our brain system, we can do things when they become our habits. If we do not train our brain to create new things, it will not be used to it. If we train our brain to think about new ideas, critical thinking, necessary ideas, possible solutions to a problem, I think creativity is not inherent, but can be trained." (Student_06)

"To me both work. Creativity is both innate and trainable. So, if we maximize our effort to learn new things it would be much better if at the same time, we have genetic creativity from our father and mother. It is better to have both." (Student_03)

"Perhaps it depends more on the environment. Maybe his parents are creative. My friend's parents are creative, but their children are not. When the parents are creative and expose their children to creative works, their children I think will follow." (Student_02)

3. Students are uncertain about their creativity

Most of these participants seem to be unconfident about their creativity as can be seen in the following interview:

“Maybe if given options among creative, neutral, and not creative, I might be in the middle. Sometimes I am creative when I must be, so I’m not enormously creative, but at least I have any bit of creativity”. (Student_02)

“To me, I’m not strongly creative, but sometimes if doing my assignment, like.... Ideas will come up and it is inevitable to become creative. If I am not creative, my assignment will not be done”. (Student_03)

“You can call me creative because whenever I do my assignment, I don’t want to imitate others’, for example I wrote things as creatively as possible, making them different from others”. (Student_01)

“If you ask me, I’m not extremely creative, but I become creative when forced to be so. I must be pushed to be as creative as possible; I must be assigned a task first”. (Student_05)

“I think I am like my peers. I think of myself as a creative person when I oversee a role in an organisation. Even though I haven’t learned and understood the role”. (Student_06)

4. Students’ creativity to cope with academic tasks

When asked about the projects or tasks experienced that require creative thinking skills the responses vary from one student to another. Most of their responses orchestrate their creative thinking skills to overcome academic tasks such as instructional design or writing research proposal.

“For example, when I was asked to compose a research proposal, I was insisted on discovering new topic where there are linguistic and cultural aspects. We must think hard to come up with new ideas that are different from the previous ones”. (Student_04)

“If you ask me, I find myself to be creative when I am involved in martial arts community. For example, if we get stuck with only a single kick, we’ll fall. Otherwise, when we use our ideas or techniques, new kicks will appear. We’ll fall if we don’t use our creativity”. (Student_02)

“Because we are majoring in education, some courses teach about teaching, for example, microteaching. Our instructor assigns us to be as creative as possible during teaching simulation, not simply relying on lesson plans created beforehand, but making the classroom atmosphere fun. This tests our creativity as students of education”. (Student_03)

“As we are pre-service teachers, it is impossible to use ordinary teaching media or materials. We can express our creativity through microteaching courses, for example through designing a lesson; what is a good way to deliver a lesson? Today, many apps can help us create creative lessons for our future students”. (Student_01)

DISCUSSION

Students’ conceptions of creativity vary according to their responses to the open question on how they conceive creativity. In general, most of the participants’ conceptions of creativity are in line with the state of the art of creativity definitions that emphasise the promotion of novelty or the creation of new ideas or things (Kaufman & Glăveanu, 2019). Most of the responses represent creativity in terms of purpose (Novelty and values) and person (for instance, being skilful, being imaginative, mindset, and giftedness) and process (idea generation, divergent thinking and problem solving). Very few reported creativity conceptions in terms of products or creative outcomes and other components of creativity in the theoretical frameworks such as environment.

Interestingly, when creativity conception was elicited through interview, the participants tend to cite the characteristics of individuals whose creativity emphasises the “person” traits on creativity. Person attribute is associated with personal qualities, mindset, cognitive skills, experience and expertise, and attitudes. In addition, these findings narrowly represent creativity in terms of mini-c (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007). These seem in contrast to previous research on teachers’ conceptions of creativity as the participants’ responses align with the theoretical frameworks. This might be attributed to learning experiences and discussions on updated learning theories these student teachers received during their courses. Despite these, their understanding on creativity seems to be limited and has not yet addressed a broader spectrum.

When it comes to the inherent or trainable nature of creative thinking skills, all interviewees believe that they are inherited and learnable. These findings are consistent with second generation view on creativity where creativity is teachable and learnable (Akyıldız & Çelik, 2020; McWilliam, 2009) although some acknowledge the gifted nature of creativity. Therefore, in psychological terms, creativity as reported by the participants encompasses both nature and nurture. While it is believed that some people are more naturally creative than others, creativity may be cultivated through practices and experiences.

The main findings on self-perceived creativity suggest that creative EFL students in higher education report greater use of techniques, senses, and environmental and behavioural control and beliefs in unconscious processes. These results are consistent with the previous studies with less notable differences. The low reliability of final product orientation and superstition subscale (Keller et al., 2007; Kumar et al., 1997) are also found from the responses. However, this research demonstrates an extra subscale that is inadequately reliable, i.e use of other people. A possible explanation for this may be the clarity of the wording in the subscale items. Or perhaps creativity is deemed innate and more likely to be developed inside one’s mental state. In Indonesian context, students are taught to work together to create things. However, when it comes to creativity, they may narrowly associate it with strong emphasis on individual ability and skills. This study also deviates from previous research (e.g. Kumar (1997); and Keller et al. (2007) where our findings reveal more discriminating items in the four subscales analysed in this study. In addition, the division between highly and lowly creative students should be interpreted with caution since this is

based on the students' self-perceived creativity not the objective measure such as a creativity test. The responses are likely to be determined by how they conceptualise the term creativity.

CONCLUSION

As creativity has been a vital skill in the current age, it is imperative for English language education students to harness these skills and conceptualise it in more holistic fashion. In general, students' conceptions are various but narrowly but closely aligned with partial conceptions of creativity as suggested by the experts including novelty, idea generation, divergence, value, and product creation. The students also supposed that the creativity can be trained through instructions. The main issue to be re-investigated could be the underlying beliefs on their hesitation to identify themselves as creative, as most participants perceived themselves within the mediocre creativity category. Last but not last, the students arrange their creativity to deal with the academic tasks. However, this study should be considered in terms of methodological limitations such as the number of samples.

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