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## **Creative Teaching in EFL Classrooms: Voices from Afghanistan**

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DOI: 10.18196/ftl.5252

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### Abstract

This qualitative research aims to explore the reported experiences of five Afghan EFL instructors at the English Department, Herat University, concerning the creative teaching of English. It specifically investigated the challenges and the opportunities regarding the creative teaching of English that these teachers have encountered in their courses. The researchers employed constructivist perspectives of learning in which learners make meaning out of their previous experiences and knowledge (Hill, 2014) as the theoretical framework to analyze and interpret the data. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed by using thematic analysis. The findings indicated that creative teaching made the learning process fun. It also revealed that creative teaching increased students' participation and motivation because it put students in the center of the learning process. The findings also demonstrated that some students showed resistance toward change—moving from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered approach—when creative teaching was implemented. It also showed that some instructors needed the support of higher education administrators to incorporate creative teaching into their courses as there was a conspicuous lack of professional development needs in this regard. The study argued that the creative teaching of English positively impacted students' academic achievements. This study could serve as a significant way to introduce information and strategies on creative teaching to L2 instructors in similar contexts as Afghanistan. The results provided implications for creative teaching in EFL classrooms as well as for the future of teaching English in ESL and EFL contexts.

*Keywords:* academic achievements; creative teaching; fostering creativity; student-centered approach  
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### Introduction

Teaching is not about covering a specific number of pages and delivering instructions to students. It is about considering students' backgrounds, needs, and interests, resulting in allowing them to take responsibility for their own learning process through activating and developing their creativity and their critical thinking skills (Hill, 2014; Sarwari, 2018). Unfortunately, due to several decades of war and conflict in Afghanistan, the education system of the

country has been fundamentally destroyed (Babury & Hayward, 2014). It is particularly apparent in the absence of educational research because the context is underrepresented in the field of English language studies (Miri, 2019). Besides, there is little or no published literature on Afghan English teachers' perceptions of creative teaching and learning. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to explore the attitudes of five Afghan EFL teachers toward the creative teaching of English. It specifically investigated the way they perceived this

concept, the challenges they encountered while applying creative teaching, and their suggestions on how to incorporate creative teaching into their language courses. This study mainly focused on answering the following research questions:

1. How do the five Afghan university EFL instructors define creative teaching?
2. What are the attitudes of five Afghan university EFL instructors toward the creative teaching of English?

Creative teaching means developing instructional strategies and techniques in novel and effective ways to enhance the attention and involvement of students, resulting in making the learning experience of a group of students enjoyable and meaningful (Sale, 2015). In this research, we referred to creative teaching as a way of designing teaching strategies and teaching materials in innovative and useful ideas, in which students' participation is encouraged, and the learners' learning journey becomes fun and interesting. In other words, the classes need to be student-centered, where students' active participation results in the successful implementation of creative teaching.

The education system in Afghanistan is mainly a teacher-centered style, and Afghan

English language teachers mostly utilize the grammar-translation method in their classes (Miri, 2016; Sarwari, 2018). Students in this situation are frequently treated as the recipients of the knowledge; they are mostly asked to memorize texts and take tests. Thus, many teachers who often employ a teacher-centered approach to teaching and rely primarily on their textbooks do not prepare students to become life-long learners. If copying from the board or a book and listening to a teacher who speaks for a long time mostly happened in the classrooms in an education context, it indicates creativity does not appear to take place in such classes (Sale, 2015). Therefore, since the concepts of student-centered approach in general and creative teaching, in particular, are new in the context of Afghanistan, there is an urgent need to explore the perceived reported experiences of Afghan EFL teachers concerning the importance as well as the challenges and possibilities of creative teaching of English in a mainly teacher-centered context.

The researchers utilized the constructivist perspectives of learning in which learners make meaning out of their previous experiences and knowledge (Hill, 2014) as a theoretical framework to analyze

and interpret the data. According to Hill (2014), “learning is affected by the context as well as the beliefs and attitudes of the learner; therefore, effective teaching occurs by stimulating students to ask their own questions” (p. 58). Since this study explored the attitudes as well as the experiences of English language instructors of Herat University, the constructivist perspectives of learning helped the researchers to seek answers to their research questions.

This study serves to introduce information as well as practical strategies for integrating creativity into English language classrooms. English language teachers and students, especially in a similar context as Afghanistan, will benefit from the findings of the current study, which reflects the Afghan English language instructors’ attitudes and experiences towards creative teaching. Both the challenges and the strategies discussed in this study enrich the perspectives towards incorporating creativity into English language classrooms. Furthermore, it contributes to the body of literature related to creative teaching, especially in an Afghan context, where research-related activities in general and in the field of TESOL and applied linguistics, in particular, have been limited.

## Literature Review

### Creative Teaching

Csikszentmihalyi (2013) elaborated on the term creativity by describing five steps that help to achieve creativity. (1) Preparation: developing a feeling of curiosity in a problematic situation. (2) Incubation: insights and ideas blow below the level of consciousness. (3) Insight: It is that moment when the problem and puzzle start to take place together. (4) Evaluation: It is the time when the person decides if the insight is worth to be pursued. (5) Elaboration: The translation of the thoughts into the final work (p. 79).

According to Doron (2016), creativity is not an inner talent that people are born with; creativity is an ability that can be developed and improved through intervention and practices. In the same vein, Root-Bernstein et al. (2017) stated that educating people for creativity should mean understanding actively rather than knowing passively. They (2017) added that to understand something, one should be able to re-create and the ability to create needs problem-seeking as well as problem-solving, which requires practice and exercises where best exercises include the emulation of

creative people and the different types of strategies they implement to find challenges and solve them. According to Hong et al. (2017), most people perceive the term creativity as goodness, making innovations as well as promoting and enriching humanity. However, for some others, creativity is indescribable, mysterious, and incomprehensible in which the definitions may vary according to the individuals' assumptions about the concept of creativity. In regard to creative teaching competence and creativity, Sale (2015) mentioned that there are instructors who complain about their students becoming bored and that they do not reveal any interest in particular lessons but they [instructors] continue teaching using the same instructional strategies, and they obtain the same result. Nevertheless, when it comes to creative instructors, they act differently in such situations, and what they choose to do differently may have positive effects, resulting in developing creative teaching competence. Brewer (2015) asserted that creative teaching has a direct connection to all instructors regardless of their field of specialization. Guzdial et al. (2018) perceived creative teaching as encouraging students to utilize their sense of curiosity to investigate, observe, and utilize their imagination to produce new

ideas and insights while they work in pairs or small groups.

### **Creativity in English Language Classrooms: Advantages and Barriers**

According to Ferrari et al. (2009), teaching is an innovative approach that allows students to become active participants and show creativity in their learning before, during, and after class. They (2009) think that warm-up exercises guide the learning process by addressing several pedagogical goals. First, they require a student to do opening work, reading the material before the class, and writing about what they already know about a topic to activate their prior knowledge. Second, they require the faculty members to become aware of the students' prior knowledge about the material that will be presented in class. Analysis of warm-up responses can be an effective way to assess students' knowledge; thus, providing a snapshot of students' knowledge just before it is needed is essential. Finally, addressing this prior knowledge in class as part of the class discussion increases a student's comprehension of that day's materials. This method is constructivist, which means encouraging students to be creative and connect to what is being gained and what they

already know about the topic. It also fosters a feedback cycle of preparation and active involvement recommended by established research in science education.

Piasecka (2018) viewed English language classrooms as the hub of creativity where students can have an enjoyable and meaningful experience through associating creative practices that encourage them to take risks of utilizing and practicing the new language. According to Christie (2016), when both language and aspiration to speak in the foreign language are present, the main goal has to be to motivate the learners to utilize the language spontaneously, which will develop their risk-taking and sense of agency as well as their creativity resulting in successfully producing the language.

According to Rus (2020), to equip students with the market's needs and required skills, EFL and ESL instructors must move to a more holistic approach to language teaching. Furthermore, to provide students with the results as they expect and to help them improve their communicative skills, ESP instructors have to make significant changes in the way they perceive language instruction and the role of communicative approaches and techniques. To achieve this, Rus emphasizes that instructors must seek and

implement creative, innovative ideas in their classes. Creative teaching motivates students, which is a pivotal element in the process of learning. Creativity and novelty have been considered significantly important to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century academic society. These are essential not only for economic development but also for the social and individual wellbeing. Therefore, creativity and novelty are crucial to be incorporated into language teaching. Brewer (2015) mentioned that teachers who implement creative teaching techniques and strategies are independent, creative, and have substantial control over their teaching. Besides, creative teaching of English develops students' knowledge, abilities, thoughtfulness, and attitudes. It also provides learners and practicing teachers with informed and practical support (Hagtvedt et al., 2019).

Although teachers and administrators value creativity in education, there are some barriers and challenges associated with practicing creative teaching. According to Wang and Kokotsaki (2018), teachers rarely recognize the essential nature of creativity as a process in the everyday context of teaching. Furthermore, in most settings, creativity is considered as an extra to the teacher's teaching responsibilities. The heavy workload on the teachers, such as relying on the

standardized tests, covering course syllabuses and plans, having limited time to practice creative teaching as well as teachers' lack of knowledge overall restrain the incorporation of creativity into teaching (Newton & Beverton, 2012; Miri, 2018; Wang & Kokotsaki, 2018). Furthermore, large class size and lecture-based methods of teaching limit student-teacher and student-student interactions, which results in students' absent participation and does not allow creative teaching to happen successfully (Sale, 2015; Sarwari, 2018). In a similar vein, Brewer (2015) stated that with an increase in the number of students, they are likely to become passive. The context can be depicted in the seminar and workshop settings where many people get together; the lecturers mainly rely on the traditional lecture style, and the learners are more of being passive observers than being active participants. It can result in not being allowed to implement and enhance creative teaching competence.

### **Fostering Creative Teaching**

One of the responsibilities of the instructors is fostering students' creativity. Thus, teachers are supposed to be aware of the practical ways to enhance students' creativity. There are different ways, such as 'social

modeling, reinforcement, and classroom ecology' through which students' creativity can be enhanced. Furthermore, a teacher's behavior plays a pivotal role in fostering students' creativity (Soh, 2017). In a similar vein, Wang and Kokotsaki (2018) emphasized that the instructors significantly hold an essential role in realizing creativity within their field of teaching and providing their pupils with enough opportunities to foster their creative abilities. Furthermore, the findings of their study indicated that the instructors valued the concept of creativity in EFL classrooms and considered enhancing students' creative thoughts as being crucial for both personal development and effective EFL learning. Moreover, the participants stated that using various art forms and playful activities as well as encouraging a stimulating classroom atmosphere for creative ideas help to facilitate creative teaching.

Teachers recognize that they are responsible for creating the conditions which can either encourage or discourage students from being creative. Tanggaard and Hjorth (2017) identified nine stipulations to make students create something on their own. These are part of creative processes, where students' creative skills can be improved. The design stipulations were "(1) problem solving,

(2) realistic tasks, (3) encrypted data, (4) distinct work procedures and deferred assessment, (5) individual idea generation and 'brainwriting,' (6) clear and significant productivity demands, (7) structured analysis, (8) cooperation and (9) feedback, (p. 222).

### Research Methods

The current study is an exploratory qualitative design. As stated by Galletta (2013), "Qualitative research is the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual (i.e., nonnumerical) data to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest," (p. 7). Since the current study aimed to explore each instructor in

connection to their experiences of creative teaching of English, the qualitative research design helped to better seek the answer to the research questions.

The study participants were five instructors of the English Department, Faculty of Languages and Literature, Herat University. To meet the criteria for this study, the participants were selected based on the following criteria, such as being current instructors of the English Department of Herat University, having at least five years of teaching at the English department, and willing to share their experiences on creative teaching. The following table includes some vital information about the participants of the current study.

Table 1. *Participants' Demographic Information*

Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Degree	Teaching Experience
Ahmad	Male	M.A. TESOL	5 years
Sahil	Male	M.A. TESOL	12 years
Arash	Male	M.A. TESOL	5 years
Shakiba	Female	M.A. TESOL	10 years
Wasal	Female	M.A. TESOL	7 years

The data collected through in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews from five instructors of the English Department of Herat University were transcribed verbatim

and were analyzed thematically. The data were divided into main themes and sub-themes and were coded and analyzed thematically. Bazeley (2013) described "coding" as a significant and



purposeful strategy for qualitative analysis. Bazeley added that “It provides a means of access to evidence; it is a tool for querying data, for testing assumptions and conclusions” (p. 125). Furthermore, the researchers listened to the recordings and went through the themes to maintain the research trustworthiness and ensure the accuracy of the emerging themes. Further, the researchers shared the data transcriptions as well as the significant codes with the interviewed participants to make sure the data were accurately reported.

## Results

### Definition of Creative Teaching Competence

Most of the participants believed that creative teaching competence means implementing various up-to-date teaching techniques and approaches in the class. The findings indicated that bringing variations in the class, exposing students to practices that they have not experienced, and encouraging them to deliver and practice things differently develop creative teaching. Besides, some common threads among the teachers’ responses regarding creative teaching include avoiding the routine methods of delivering

the content, using different techniques for starting and ending the class and changing the class seating arrangements. The findings also indicated that repetitiousness and monotony discourage creative teaching. For example, one of the participants stated, “If you search on dictionaries, the first word that comes up as a synonym for creativity is inventiveness; therefore, it means the ability to create new ideas and things out of nothing and without using others’ opinions and materials.” According to another participant, creativity in education means inventing the best possible methodologies and then implementing them in an educational context to make it enjoyable for learners, according to the findings.

### Advantages of Creative Teaching

Almost all the participants postulated that the creative teaching of English helps students to learn easier and better, resulting in allowing the instructors to offer quality teaching. The findings revealed that there is no disadvantage to teaching creatively. For example, some participants stated that creative teaching encourages teachers to teach differently. In other words, creative teaching requires teachers to bring variations to their classes and avoid the routine way(s) of covering their classes. Another participant

argued that when creativity in teaching comes to mind, teachers have to think of various socio-cultural, institutional, and pedagogical issues to deliver quality education. Similarly, another participant noted that creative teachers usually think about designing and developing different up-to-date instructional materials and teaching activities to offer a safe space for students to participate in the class. According to this teacher, this method puts students in the center of the learning process and helps teachers to enjoy the sheer joy of their profession.

The findings also showed that some students in a class where creativity is considered might experience variations, such as they are exposed to different types of exercises and practices. It was also found that having a different teaching method brings joy and fun to the class and prevents boredom, specifically in large classes where they are made up of more than 50 students, the majority of whom are demotivated and reluctant to learn. Moreover, students' active participation in the class is one of the major challenges that instructors in Afghanistan struggle within their classes, according to the study findings. There are large classes made up of many students, the majority of whom are not motivated and are not eager to their field

of study. However, they had to keep it because of the very unfair education system in Afghanistan. According to the participants, one of the efficient techniques to motivating and encouraging students' participation in the language classes in an Afghan context is to think of teaching creatively and avoiding the routine and regular way of covering the course content. Creative teaching inspires students to participate in different class activities, and it also takes students to a competitive situation where they enjoy their learning atmosphere.

Developing students' critical thinking skills is a core concept of the developed countries' curriculum and education system, according to the participants' point of view. Unfortunately, due to the several decades of war and conflict and a dearth of educational resources, Afghanistan's education system has paid no/less attention to critical thinking and critical pedagogies into the higher education curriculum. Besides, lecture-based teaching and relying on memorization is the most popular approach to teaching and learning in Afghanistan. Seeking the interviewed instructors' opinions regarding the advantages of creative teaching of English, most of them think that bringing creativity into the classroom helps to develop students' critical thinking skills. Introducing students to a

variety of exercises and activities and avoiding the regular and routine methods of teaching make students think actively and reach new ideas and perspectives relevant to what they are exposed to and what they experience inside and outside the class.

In addition, most of the participants claimed that they support having a creative and dynamic classroom as it helps them offer quality and effective teaching. According to Shakiba, teachers have to think of their students' needs, interests, and goals. Providing quality and effective teaching leads students to have an effective academic experience. Therefore, creative teachers are more successful in offering effective teaching to their students compared to teachers who prefer routine and regular teaching techniques.

Several participants also pointed out that creative teaching leads to develop students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills. For example, one of the participants stated that using various in-class activities not only brings creativity to the class, but it also allows students to use higher-order thinking skills. She added that it provides students with opportunities to have active participation in the class. Similarly, another asserted that when teachers attempt to utilize

creative teaching activities in their courses, students develop not only their analytical skills but also their collaboration and communication skills since they tend to work together to answer questions in the class.

### **Barriers to Creative Teaching**

The participants stated that the major issue with implementing creative teaching is large and heterogenous classes, where students are not provided with enough opportunities to take active in-class participation. In other words, classes are mainly teacher-centered, and instructors are not able to implement interactive-based and student-centered approaches. The findings demonstrated that the creative teaching of English requires instructors to practice and perform a wide range of communicative-based techniques. However, when it comes to large and crowded classes, the teachers are not able to reach out to each student and provide them with a chance to express themselves in the process of learning.

Further, the data revealed that the context is under-resourced, and the required teaching materials to support creative teaching in the language classes are limited. Thus, the instructors encounter challenges in terms of accessibility to the resources and tools such as

technological, printing, and copying to support creative teaching. For example, Ahmad stated that the teachers need the support of the administrators in higher education to provide them with enough resources to be able to practice dynamic and creative classes. Instructors design activities and tasks where they can engage and motivate students to benefit the class and to foster their creative skills. Nonetheless, due to a lack of resources such as printing, copying, and technological tools, they are unable to practice the provided activities.

Moreover, the participants argued that each instructor is responsible for teaching at least 16 class-meetings per week, and each class is made up of 40-80 students. Thus, due to the heavy workload, the teachers are unable to allocate enough time to design tasks and exercises to motivate students to become active learners and enhance their creative skills. One participant stated that she barely has time to think of creating plans through which she can practice creative teaching due to the hectic schedule she has to cover.

### **Fostering Creative Teaching and Learning Techniques**

The participants talked about their strategies through which they believe they can

foster students' creativity despite all the challenges they encounter in their classes. The findings revealed that implementing communicative-based approaches to teaching and giving students opportunities to express their opinions, needs, willingness, and feelings are two of the significantly essential and effective strategies which help to enhance students' creative skills and practice creative teaching competence. Ahmad mentioned that to be able to implement creative teaching in language classes, you [instructors] have first to ensure that the students are actively engaged in the learning process, and they acquire the content by connecting and relating to them, not by passively memorizing the material.

Providing students with a wide range of activities and taking the class out of the conventional way of covering the content could be another strategy to fostering students' creativity. Three participants claimed that introducing students to different types of activities and exercises expose them to thinking critically and differently. In other words, bringing a variety of tasks and activities to the class brings joy, fun, and new concepts and ideas to the classroom. Students who experience the class differently from the previous session are more engaged and active compared to those who experience the same

approaches to teaching throughout their academic journey. The instructors reported that they consider the dynamic and vibrant classes to be significantly important to practicing creative teaching in language classes.

According to the participants, problem-solving and question-answer activities are other teaching techniques that help teachers to implement creative teaching and allow learners to develop their critical thinking and creativity skills. One participant stated that raising questions and seeking answers from students make them exchange ideas and knowledge and learn collaboratively, where it enhances students' creativity and helps to practice creative teaching and learning. Besides, several teachers maintained that exposing students to problems and asking them to offer solutions can awaken students' critical thinking skills, which, in the long term, can result in enhancing their creativity. Examples of such kind of activities, according to these participants, include think-pair-share, discussion, reflection, and reader-response.

### Discussion

When the teacher participants were asked about their definition of creative

teaching, they mainly spoke about introducing students to a wide range of different types of activities and exercises. Besides, making changes to the conventional way of teaching, helping students to produce the language and lead their own learning process, and exposing students to activities and tasks, particularly problem-solving tasks that require critical thinking are among the definitions expressed by the interviewees. According to Tanggaard and Hjorth (2017), students' creative skills can be enhanced by providing them with problem-solving as well as authentic tasks, individual idea production, vivid and significant productivity demands, and collaboration. In the same vein, Wang and Kokotsaki (2018) study's findings of the English language teacher's conception of creative teaching were divided into themes such as "creative products, cognitive development, creative teaching approaches, and freedom in choice and expression" (p. 115). Guzdial et al. (2018) perceived creative teaching as encouraging students to utilize their sense of curiosity to investigate and observe and to utilize their imagination to produce new ideas and insights while they work in pairs or small groups.

The teacher participants also spoke about the active participation of students as well as their interest and motivation in classes

where creative teaching takes place. However, in large classes, which is common in the Afghan context (Sarwari, 2018), students are mainly passive, and the instructors deliver the instructions through lecture style. This situation makes the implementation of creative teaching approaches challenging. According to Brewer (2015), with an increasing number of students, they are likely to become passive. The context can be depicted through the seminar and workshop settings where many people get together in which the lecturers mainly rely on the traditional lecture style, and the learners are passive observers than active participants.

Regarding the advantages and effectiveness of creative teaching in language classes, almost all the teacher participants agreed that creative teaching encourages students' participation and develops students' critical thinking skills and their self-confidence. The findings of the study regarding the advantages of creative teaching are in line with Rus (2020), where the researcher stated that creative teaching motivates students, which is a pivotal element in the process of learning. Creativity and novelty have been considered significantly important to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century academic society. In a similar vein, Brewer (2015) mentioned

that teachers who implement creative teaching techniques and strategies are independent, creative, and have robust control over their teaching and their students. Besides, the creative teaching of English develops students' knowledge, abilities, thoughtfulness, and attitudes, as well as providing learners and practicing teachers with informed and practical support (Hagtvedt et al., 2019).

The findings showed that the use of the Grammar-translation method in English courses is a common approach in Afghanistan. On the other hand, there are large classes made up of more than 50 students. Each instructor is supposed to teach a minimum of 16 hours per week. Utilizing creative teaching techniques is a challenging task in classes where the lecturer is dominant, and the students are passive receivers of knowledge. Moreover, the heavy workload and pressure on the teachers do not let them develop their understanding of developing creative teaching techniques and implement in their classes (Newton & Beverton, 2012; Miri, 2018; Wang & Kokotsaki, 2018). Brewer (2015) stated that teachers are frequently not sure about their knowledge, skills, and experiences of strategies that develop creativity as it is a difficult task for the teachers to recognize opportunities and

chances that help to implement creative teaching techniques.

### Conclusion and Implications

In a rapidly changing world, education systems need to make fundamental changes to prepare learners to meet the requirements of the job market. Both educators and educational authorities should facilitate the process of incorporating creative teaching techniques into education systems. Lack of teaching resources, large classes, heavy workload, pressure on the teachers, and lecture-based method of teaching constrain the process of incorporating creative teaching. Educators need the support of educational authorities in facilitating their participation in professional development programs as well as in providing enough resources from teaching materials to classrooms and minimizing the size of the large classes. Besides, teacher educators need to be equipped with up-to-date creative teaching techniques and strategies. In addition, teachers need to reflect on their teaching practices and conduct research to explore the tribulations and opportunities of creative teaching in connection to their teaching context. Because the current study is qualitative research conducted in a conflict

zone with unique socio-political features and the data cannot be generalized, the researchers expect that this study serves to raise attention to the importance of creative teaching of English. This study contributes to the body of literature related to incorporating creative teaching into language classrooms, especially in an under-resourced context like Afghanistan. Future researchers can conduct various research designs on creative teaching, especially experimental design, to explore the effectiveness of this teaching approach. Since the findings of this study are limited to the voice of teachers, future researchers can collect voices of students concerning their teachers' use of creative teaching.

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