TURKISH PRE-SERVICE EFL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CREATIVITY

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Abstract

Creativity is considered one of the key 21st century skills and has received an increasing amount of attention in the field of education. How teachers perceive creativity has a significant impact on their pedagogical practices to stimulate student creativity in the classroom. The present exploratory study, based on a qualitative approach, aimed to investigate pre-service English teachers' perceptions of creativity. Analysis of data coming from a semi-structured focus-group interview with eight pre-service teachers revealed their perception of creativity as being different and unique, having extraordinary ideas and being able to produce original outcomes. The participants posited that creativity was innate to some extent and environmental factors such as family environment, cultural background and school education contributed to its development later in life. They suggested using open-ended, communicative, and collaborative tasks in English classrooms to foster student creativity. As prospective teachers, they perceived themselves creative to some extent, but felt unprepared to teach creativity. Finally, they all agreed on the facilitative role of teacher education in helping PTs teach creatively and develop an understanding of teaching creativity.

Keywords: creativity, teaching creativity, pre-service teacher education, ELT.

1. Introduction

For over a century, the research on creativity has produced findings that have had significant impact on personal, social and educational domains. The concept of creativity has been investigated by researchers focusing on its psychological aspects. This line of research has attempted to understand, describe and assess the development of human creativity; and as a result, the findings have revealed that creativity is an important factor in most essential skills such as language acquisition and critical thinking (Runco, 2007). From the educational perspective, too, the creativity research has significantly reshaped educational goals, administrative matters and even the school setting as a part of 21st Century Skills.

The relationship between creativity and education works both ways. Not only does education have a vital role in stimulating learners' creative and innovative thinking (Cropley, 2001; Henessey & Amabile, 1987; Runco, 1993; Starko, 2005; Sternberg & Williams, 1996; Torrance; 1983), but creativity also contributes to learning because as learners build knowledge they utilize creative effort (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007). In this framework, teachers are often expected to cultivate students' creative potential by helping them gain knowledge and skills related with creativity. What is more, as role models, teachers have a significant part in achieving creativity in educational settings (Berki, 2005).

From this standpoint, it is acknowledged that teachers' conceptions might foster or obstruct students' behavior since how teachers systematize their instructional practices is principally influenced by their knowledge and beliefs (Beghetto, 2006). Therefore, teachers' perceptions of creativity should be taken into account in any educational setting with an objective to develop creativity in students. In other words, it is initially important to find out how teachers conceptualize creativity in their own particular educational settings if we want to make sure that teachers want to facilitate students' creative potential and that they know how to do so (Runco, 2003).

However, in spite of the common consensus on the teachers' significant role in facilitating students' creative thinking and expression, the research that examines teacher perceptions on creativity is somehow limited. As Fryer and Collings (1991) put it, most studies have attempted to find out teachers' perceptions indirectly by measuring perceptions prior and subsequent to creativity workshops or have focused on teachers' attitudes towards the personality traits of creative individuals. What is more, there is inconsistency between the findings of such research (Westby & Dawson, 1995). Therefore, it is necessary to conduct further research focusing on in-service and prospective teachers' creativity conceptions (Nickerson, 1999) and the current study has been conducted upon this need.

2. Literature Review

In the educational framework, the word creativity is a common term, but the definitions provided by the educational and psychological researchers as well as educators are somewhat vague (Sawyer 2006a; 2006b). The term creativity may signify the process, person, product, or context; but the definitions may include one or several of these factors together, even in a contradictory manner (Taylor, 1988). Despite this elusiveness, research indicates some common themes in the definitions. Researchers and educators fundamentally concur that creativity refers to "the ability to produce work that is novel (original, unexpected) and at the same time appropriate so that the outcome meets the constraints and requirements of a task at hand" (Kaufman & Baer, 2004, p.6).

Creativity researchers also agree that creativity is commonly "a process that leads to an outcome that is novel, original, unconventional" (Ryhammar & Brolin, 1999, p.262). Sawyer (2006b) gives a broader definition by stating that creativity is the appearance of something original and appropriate. Plucker, Beghetto, and Dow (2004) assert that "creativity is the interaction among aptitude, process, and environment by which an individual or group produces a perceptible product that is both novel and useful as defined within a social context" (p. 90). Correspondingly, according to Valtanen et al., (2008), creativity requires critical and reflective thinking. Within the same framework, Dineen, Samuel, and Livesey (2005) maintain that creativity necessitates both divergent and productive thinking in order to ensure novelty as well as appropriateness.

According to the research on teachers' beliefs about creativity, it is not only researchers who have different opinions on creativity. Results of studies on teachers' views of creativity have also revealed that in the classroom setting, teachers often attempt to develop the creative potential of children when they see one (Chappell, 2007; Runco & Johnson, 2002), but they have different explanations for the term (Fleith, 2000; Fryer & Collings, 1991). For example, Diakidoy and Phtiaka (2001) point out to inconsistencies between teachers' conceptions of creativity. Also, teachers tend to have a limited view of creativity with a stereotyping attitude and they emphasize the lack of attention to creativity in teacher education (Davies, et al., 2004). What is more, according to the results reported by some researchers (Beghetto, 2006; Fasko, 2001; Runco, 2003; Westby & Dawson, 1995), although teachers generally seem to

value creativity, they hold negative attitudes and little tolerance for behaviors and attributes associated with it.

From this perspective, how teachers perceive creativity as a concept and the extent to which such perceptions align with definitions of creativity in literature proves to be important for teachers who wish to facilitate creativity in their learners (Runco & Johnson, 2001). Contemporary research on teachers' conceptions about creativity has revealed valuable outcomes about what teachers think about the nature of creativity, their conceptualization of creative individuals, and their beliefs about the kind of classrooms that promote creativity. A comprehensive review of this line of research by Andiliou and Murphy (2010), in which they analyzed peer-reviewed, empirical research studies of teachers' beliefs about creativity appearing in the published literature, suggests that the beliefs that teachers hold about creativity have a significant impact on the role they undertake in relation to creative thinking as a learning objective and on the instructional strategies they use to develop the personality characteristics required for creative behavior. They also conclude that there is still a need for further research on teachers' conceptions of creativity and their role in students' creative thinking development (Andiliou and Murphy, 2010).

Similarly, pre-service teachers' conceptions of creativity are significant since future teachers need the necessary awareness and training about creativity even before they graduate. Kampylis et al. (2009) draw attention to this issue and report that the facilitation of students' creativity is included in the teachers' role, but pre-service teachers do not feel confident and well-trained enough to fulfill this particular expectation. There are studies that investigate pre-service teachers' conceptions of creativity in various areas (e.g. Bolden et al., 2010 – mathematics). Also, recent studies within EFL (English as a foreign language) setting underline the necessity for a supportive classroom environment to promote creativity (Rao, 2014; Heathfield, 2015; Hlenschi-Stroie, 2015; Markova, 2015; Read, 2015; Wright, 2015; Wang & Kokotsaki, 2018). However, literature indicates a shortage of such studies regarding pre-service teachers' conceptions of creativity especially in language teaching field in different contexts. Thus, informed by the literature mentioned above, the present exploratory study, based on a qualitative approach, aims to investigate Turkish pre-service English teachers' perceptions of creativity. More specifically, pre-service teachers' (PTs hereafter) understanding of creativity in teaching and learning has been explored by addressing the following research questions:

1. How do Turkish PTs of English define creativity?

2. What do Turkish PTs of English think about teachability of creativity?

3. How do Turkish PTs of English perceive their own creativity?

4. How do Turkish PTs of English perceive the role of teacher education in developing creativity?

3. Method

3.1. Design, Participants and Setting

The present exploratory study adopted qualitative approach. It took place in an English Language Teaching (ELT) program of a state university in Turkey. The four-year ELT program offers basic skills courses such as Reading and Writing in English, Contextual English Grammar and Oral Communication Skills and method courses such as English Language Teaching Methods, Teaching Language Skills and Instructional Technologies and Materials Design. In the last year of the ELT Program, PTs receive two practicum courses: School Experience in English Language Education in the first term and Teaching Practice in

English Language Education in the second term. PTs are sent to different primary, secondary and high schools to observe teachers and students in the first term and to teach micro- and macro-lesson plans in the second term. At the time of the study, there were 135 PTs enrolled in the fourth year of the program. Eight PTs were selected using convenience sampling based on their willingness. Demographic characteristics of the participants were as follows: The participating PTs were all native speakers of Turkish. Four of the PTs were female and four were male. Their ages ranged from 19 to 21. None of them had any prior teaching experience. In the fall semester, they had completed the observation sessions and in the spring semester, they were doing their practicum at the assigned schools.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

Data for the present study came from a semi-structured focus group interview. Due to the exploratory approach of the present study, the focus group interview was preferred to gather in-depth information about PTs' perceptions of creativity. Focus-group interviews produce data and insights that cannot be easily reached without the interaction found in a group setting (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The face-to-face interview lasted around 50 minutes and was audio-recorded for transcription purposes. During the interview, the questions were asked in English, but PTs were free to choose the language, i.e., English or Turkish to share their opinions. The interview questions aimed to explore PTs' perceptions of the notions of creativity, teachability of creativity in the classroom, their own creativity as a future teacher, and the role of teacher education in enhancing creative ability. The transcribed data were analyzed by repeated reading to identify and report common patterns, themes and divergences within the data, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994).

4. Findings

4.1. PTs' Conceptions of Creativity

The interview began with PTs' definitions of creativity. They defined creativity as 'being different and unique,' 'having extraordinary ideas' and 'being able to produce new and original products.' PTs also discussed whether defining factors of creativity came from nature or nurture. There was an agreement among the PTs that creativity is innate to some extent, but can be enhanced in life. They stated that factors such as family environment, cultural background and school education influence creative behavior. PTs shared the following opinions:

I believe 30 % of creative behavior can be explained by the innate nature of creativity. 70 % is about the environmental factors.

Creativity is an innate trait, but like other abilities, it can be developed based on experience.

Children are born with creative potential. The family in which they grow up and the schools they attend to might enhance or obstruct their creativity.

I think culture also influences individuals' creativity. Some cultures value creative ideas more than others.

4.2. Teachability of Creativity

All PTs agreed on the teachability of creativity and discussed that the teacher, types of classroom tasks, the classroom environment and attitudes of school administration influence its development in the classroom. They also listed the characteristics of a creative student.

PTs identified teachers as influential figures in enhancing students' creative potential. They posited that as teachers are responsible for facilitating students' creativity development,

they should have an understanding of creativity and be knowledgeable about teaching creativity and creatively. Here are some of their comments:

The role of teachers is very important to students' creativity. Teachers should recognize the creativity in students and establish an environment that supports students' creative ability.

Teachers should believe that creativity can be taught in the classroom if suitable tasks are designed.

Teachers are responsible for teaching students skills such as questioning, analyzing, synthesizing and problem solving. These skills will foster creative performance.

Teachers may not consider themselves creative, but they can design lesson plans to promote students' creative behavior in the classroom. A wide range of teaching resources are available on the web. Teachers can adapt creative ideas to their own teaching context.

While discussing the teachability of creativity, all PTs mentioned that types of classroom tasks and activities contribute to students' creativity development too. For a foreign language classroom, PTs suggested implementing tasks that are open-ended, communicative and collaborative for the promotion of creativity. Here are some of their comments:

I believe the open-ended nature of tasks stimulates students' creativity. Students produce new, original, unique ideas. Tasks with only one possible answer might impede creativity.

Tasks based on production support creativity in the classroom. When students are asked to design a poster, create a podcast or plan a trip, they might use their creative potential.

I am doing my practicum in a private primary school. In one of the English classes I observe, a teacher asked students to design a new sport game and students came up with the idea of Mars football. I found the idea very creative. I think tasks that are different and that ask students create something new fosters students' creative potential.

When students work in groups to complete a task, they talk, exchange ideas, and help each other. They learn from each other. They also inspire each other. Together, they approach tasks and solve problems in more innovative ways.

The classroom environment was also mentioned by PTs as an important variable to enhance students' creativity. PTs believed teacher-centered classrooms where students have little or no control might impede their creativity. As one PT stated and others agreed, "students' creative thinking ability cannot be developed in a classroom environment where students are passive recipients of input." One PT also referred to the size of the classroom and said that "crowded classes are difficult to manage for creative teaching. It is easier to design creative instruction for a small number of students." As suggested by another PT and agreed by others, availability of a wide range of materials and tools also stimulates creativity.

A classroom equipped with computers with Internet connection, a projector, or a smartboard creates better opportunities for creative teaching. Students can also produce more creative products such as a podcast or a digital story in such a classroom environment.

PTs' responses to the question about the teachability of creativity also focused on the attitudes of school administration. They agreed on the importance of school support for teachers' creative pedagogical practices. The following comment of a PTs summarizes all PTs' opinions on the topic:

School administration should not force teachers to follow the assigned coursebook closely, as instructed in a teacher's manual. Rather, teachers should be encouraged to design their own methodology to foster creativity in the classroom.

Another theme that emerged during the discussion was features of a creative student. All PTs agreed that it is important for teachers to recognize these characteristics of creative students and establish a learning environment where they feel comfortable and respected. Here are their definitions of creative students:

Creative students ask many questions.

Creative students come up with unexpected, unusual, original answers or solutions.

Creative students easily get bored when they are exposed to similar materials and instruction again and again.

Creative students are usually risk takers.

Creative students are good at adapting or improving ideas and products of other people.

4.3. PTs' Perceptions of their Own Creativity

During the interview, PTs were asked whether they perceived themselves creative as teacher candidates. PTs' responses revealed that all PTs except one had considered themselves creative only to a limited extent. Only one PT said he had always considered himself creative. However, they all felt unprepared to teach creativity. Here are some of their comments:

I don't think I am really creative. This worries me because I want to be a creative teacher.

I am a creative person. I can always find creative solutions to problems in life, but I don't feel competent enough to use my creativity for teaching.

Creativity is an important skill for 21st century learning. I know I should teach my students creativity, but don't really know how.

When I was learning English, my teachers did not have a very creative way of teaching. Their practices were kind of traditional- not fostering our creativity in the classroom. This might explain why I do not find myself very creative.

4.4. PTs' Perceptions of the Role of Teacher Education

PTs had a consensus on the supportive role of teacher education in developing their creativity. They believed their creativity had increased since their entry to the program. They mentioned the courses they had received and the attitudes of the instructors as contributing to their understanding and practice of creativity. The following comments illustrate their points:

I never considered myself very creative, but I think my creativity has developed in this program. Receiving practice-based courses such as Task-based Instruction and Teaching English to Young Learners and doing my practicum at a primary school contributed to my creativity.

Being creative had never been my concern before I started this program. In the methodology courses, we are supposed to design classroom tasks, teaching materials or lesson plans. I force myself to generate original, creative ideas.

Observing a real classroom for my practicum allows me to see practices of creative teaching. Some teachers design very creative teaching tasks. It is great to see how, in a real classroom setting, students enjoy these tasks and come up with creative outcomes. I feel much inspired.

I had never thought about creativity before I came to this department. But here our instructors emphasize it as a 21ˢᵗ century skill and expect us to be creative as future teachers.

In one of the methodology courses, we were supposed to work in groups to create tasks for a specific group of EFL learners. The instructor encouraged us to generate original ideas. Nothing different came to our mind but when we talked to the instructor, she gave us inspiring examples.

The interview ended with PTs' suggestions for fostering creativity in teacher education. PTs stated that a course specifically focusing on creativity would enhance their understanding of creativity, teaching for creativity and teaching creatively. They also posited that PTs should be provided with more opportunities to observe teachers in real EFL classrooms. As they all agreed on, being introduced to a real classroom setting, observing classroom instruction of different teachers and designing lesson plans at micro- and macro-levels made PTs aware of the gap in their creative ability.

To summarize, the present study aimed to explore Turkish EFL PTs' understanding of creativity, opinions about teachability of creativity in the classroom, perceptions of their own creative ability as a future teacher, and their views on the role of teacher education in enhancing creative thinking and behavior. Eight PTs participated in the study and data came from a focused-group interview. Findings revealed that PTs perceived creativity as being different and unique, having extraordinary ideas and being able to produce original products. They believed creativity was innate to some extent and environmental factors contributed to its development later in life. All PTs agreed that creativity could be taught in the classroom as long as teachers had an understanding of creativity and implemented appropriate instruction for creativity development in a supportive classroom environment and the school had a positive attitude to its promotion in the classroom. PTs believed that open-ended, communicative tasks completed collaboratively would foster students' creative thinking in the classroom. PTs considered themselves creative to some extent, but felt unprepared to teach creativity. Finally, they all agreed on the facilitative role of teacher education in helping PTs teach creatively and develop an understanding of teaching creativity.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

There has been a considerable debate concerning the conceptualization of creativity. A widely agreed upon definition of creativity states that creativity requires both novelty and usefulness (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). Novelty or originality is crucial for creativity but is not sufficient. Creative ideas or products should also be useful or effective. In the present study, PTs' definitions revealed their limited conceptualization of creativity. PTs recognized original products as part of creativity, but could not further define that this product must be useful. PTs' definitions also focused on the product rather than the process. Cohen (1989) posits that emphasizing the product means neglecting the process of creativity, which might result in teachers' ignoring students' everyday insights for developing creative products.

PTs' discussion of creativity also focused on the question of whether creativity is an innate personality trait or something that can be developed over time. PTs agreed on the idea that all individuals have their own creativity potential supporting the views of many researchers (e.g., Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, & Gardner, 1994; Gardner, 2011), and this potential can be developed or suppressed later in life depending on some factors such as family environment, cultural background or school education. Those factors have been shown to be critical to the development of creativity in many other studies (Fasko, 2001; Deng, Wang, & Zhao, 2016; Fleith, 2000; Niu & Sternberg, 2003).

PTs believed in teachability of creativity in the classroom and stated that creativity can be fostered through variety of tasks in a positive school environment where teachers are aware of their significant role in stimulating student creativity and supported by school administration. The role of the teacher and the school environment in developing students' creativity has been mentioned by many researchers (Feldhusen, 2005; Fleith, 2000; Kruif, McWilliam, Ridely & Wakely, 2000; Mourgues et al., 2014). Aljughaiman and Mowrer-Reynolds (2005) posited that "to foster student creativity teachers need to identify characteristics of the creative personality, recognize creative production, understand the cognitive processes used by creative students and ultimately establish an environment that promotes the students' interest" (p. 17). PTs in the present study could identify some of the characteristics of a creative student. They defined a creative student as being curious, original, social, risk-taker and energetic. The descriptors mentioned by the PTs were also used by teachers in various studies   (Kampylis et al., 2009; Liu & Lin, 2014; Runco & Johnson, 2002; Sak, 2004).

In relation to teachability of creativity, PTs posited that being presented with a task or a problem in the classroom would encourage students to produce an original outcome or a solution. Their suggestion supports the view that creativity is manifested when an individual encounters a novel, ill-structured situation and attempts to define the problem at hand (Mumford, et al., 1991). For the development of creativity, PTs also emphasized creating a student-centered learning environment based on collaboration. This finding is in line with the studies discussing sociocultural and constructivist learning theories in relation to creativity development (Chan & Chan, 1999; Kampyliset et al., 2009; Myhill & Wilson, 2013; Rubenstein, McCoach, & Siegle, 2013; Sak, 2004; Zbainos & Anastasopoulou, 2012).

As future teachers, PTs perceived themselves creative to some extent but did not feel prepared to foster creativity. PTs agreed that teacher education contributed to their understanding of creativity, creative teaching, and teaching creativity, but not sufficiently. Similar concerns were reported by pre-service and in-service teachers in previous studies (Kampyliset et al., 2009; Eckhoff, 2011).

To conclude, this study aimed to contribute to the relevant literature by focusing on the perceptions of Turkish PTs' of English on creativity. As one of the key 21st century skills, creativity has been receiving an increasing attention in various fields of education including foreign/second language teaching. It is widely accepted that teachers' understanding of creativity is likely to influence their pedagogical practices to foster students' creative thinking and behavior. Teachers' beliefs on creativity are translated into their practice as long as creativity is considered an important learning goal and conditions necessary for its development are ensured to empower teachers to achieve this goal (Andiliou & Murphy, 2010). In this vein, it is important for PTs to develop adequate conceptions of creativity. Teacher education plays a significant role in providing PTs with training on the nature of creativity, the characteristics of creative students and the requirements of a classroom environment to promote creativity. Thus, pre-service English teacher education programs should be more explicit in their approach to creative teaching and teaching creativity if newly qualified teachers are to develop student creativity in the classroom.

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