



*Ferdowsi University of Mashhad*

***Investigating the Relationship between  
Iranian EFL Learner's Creativity and  
Performance in Written Narrative Tasks***

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*IN THE NAME OF*

*ALLAH*

*THE MOST*

*COMPASSIONATE*

*THE MOST*

*MERCIFUL*



بسمه تعالی  
دانشگاه فردوسی مشهد

We hereby certify that we have read this thesis written by Ms. Fateme Javedanmehr entitled “Investigating the relationship between Iranian EFL learner’s creativity and performance in written narrative tasks”, and that it is satisfactory in scope and quality as a thesis for the degree of M.A. in Teaching English as a Foreign language (TEFL).

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## Abstract

The present study aimed at examining the relationship between learner creativity and performance in written narrative tasks in the first part and in the second part the relationship between accuracy, complexity (lexical and grammatical) and fluency of learner language in written narrative tasks and learner creativity and its components in the context of Iranian EFL students. To this end, a sample of 222 EFL students from four universities in Mashhad (Iran) participated in this study. Our study involved measuring the participants' creativity using creativity test and eliciting written narrative performance from the participants with the help of a narrative task. The task involved two parts of narrating a story on the basis of a picture and writing a memory. For the first section of our analysis we used correlation and ANOVA. The results exhibited a significant relationship between learners' performance in written narrative tasks and their total creativity, and also with some sub constructs of creativity: fluency, originality and flexibility. Afterwards, for the second section, we calculated fluency, accuracy, lexical complexity and grammatical complexity of their narrations using relevant formulas. Then, we ran correlation and t-test to analyze the obtained data. Different findings were gained applying either method. Finally, the results were discussed in the context of language teaching and learning.

*Key terms:* Learner creativity, creative Fluency, Originality, Flexibility, Elaboration, Written narrative task, Fluency, Accuracy, Lexical complexity, Grammatical complexity

## CHAPTER ONE

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# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Background

Creativity is one of the psychological constructs that both professionals and laypeople seem to understand, yet it is not easy to be defined. That may be because of its overlap with traditional individual differences categories (Dornyei, 2005), e.g. it is one of the three basic aspects of Sternberg theory of successful intelligence (Sternberg, 2002). However, creativity extends beyond the intellectual domain. Recent personality theories usually include a prominent creativity component. In 2004, Runco summarized the psychological literature of creativity in a review in which he mentioned that the scientific study of creativity was initiated by Guilford (1950) where he stated a list of cognitive processes involved in creativity; however, he later started to focus on divergent thinking as the prime cognitive component of creativity (Guilford, 1959). Nonetheless, some studies suggested that divergent thinking should not be identified as creative thinking (e.g. Nicholls, 1972).

Creativity was always referred to as the ability of producing original, novel and useful work or idea (Amabile, 1996; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999). In 1999, The National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) recognized four characteristics of creative processes: imaginative behavior, purposeful activity, originality, and utility. They define creativity as: “Imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value” (p.30). In the same vein, Torrance (1966) believed that creativity has the following constituents: (1) creative fluency, the ability to produce a large number of ideas; (2) flexibility, the ability to produce a large variety of ideas; (3) originality, the ability to produce unusual, unique ideas or ideas which are statistically infrequent and (4) elaboration, the ability to develop or embellish ideas and to produce many details.

In the educational domain, creativity teaching includes the development of a combination of abilities, skills, attitudes, motivation, knowledge, and other attributes (Kaufman, 2009; Runco, 2003, 2004, 2007; Starko, 2010; Sternberg, 2003). However, recently the development of creative potentials of students is

emphasized instead of their immediate creative achievements or performance. NACCCE (1999) set out proposals to support the development of creativity in education in schools, claiming that creativity in education is not just an opportunity, but a necessity. Nowadays, it is an international trend to integrate creativity in curriculum frameworks. With this increasing global concern, reforming the structure of education to include much greater focus on developing critical and creative skills is happening across the world including Asia. Recently, countries of China, Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong, and some other Asian countries in the support of their governments are trying to implement curriculum reforms in a top-down process, which emphasizes creativity development in the primary and secondary schools (Cheng, 2011). To this end, they are in need of effective methods to infuse creativity elements into their regular classrooms (Cheng, 2004).

A shift in learning requires a change in teaching practices and methods. People use and follow different ways of collecting and organizing information into useful knowledge. Issues such as time constraints, lack of useful resources, teachers' experience and so on, make it extremely difficult for teachers to cater for the individual differences (Cheng, 2010). This is why innovative teaching is addressed, which is the implementation of new teaching methods and practices aimed at fostering teachers' and students' creativity. It is important that the education policy makers note that the starting points of creativity reforms in Asian places may be quite different from that of some Western countries. Cheng (2010) in his study noticed that the cultural level issues besides the individual level and system level problems are the origin of the teachers' tensions and dilemmas in this new curriculum.

One of the areas in which it seems that creativity is a relevant topic is the narrative genre. As Johnstone (2008) states, the concept of narrative has become a significant part of the repertoire of the social sciences since the mid-1950s and has been one of the major areas of research within linguistics. Various areas of narrative from its formal structure to the use of it in the presentation of self have been explored by the researchers (O'zyıldırım, 2009). A narrative, by

definition, refers to the recitation a fictional or real account of an event or an experience sequentially (Justice, Bowles, Pence, & Gosse, 2010). Narrative is one type of discourse with the classification of oral and written language. Spoken discourse analysis, which is concerned with speech, is studied more extensively than written discourse analysis (Atkinson, 1991; Stubbs, 1997; vanDijk, 1997).

Similarly, as indicated by Johnstone (2008), most studies on narratives concentrate on the investigation of narrative structures in oral language. In a study, O'zyıldırım (2009) investigated the narrative structures in the oral language in comparison with the written version. He concluded the structure of personal experience narratives as a specific genre. Narrative tasks are well-established and frequently researched task types (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1999; Robinson, 1995). They usually involve the creation of a story in response to some kind of stimulus: a picture strip or a short film so this task type seems ideal as far as the manifestation of creativity is concerned. Sharples (1999) illustrated that because writing is an open-ended design process it is comparable to creative design rather than problem solving which is without settled stages, specific results or a defined goal. Vass (2007) also agrees with Sharples in this assumption that writing as creative design builds on creativity. He studied the role of emotions in children's creative writing and indicated the centrality of emotions in the creative writing and the role of emotion-driven thinking in phases of shared engagement. Also Rojas-Drummond, Albarrán and Littleton (2008) studied how primary school children learn to collaborate and collaborate to learn on creative writing projects by using diverse cultural artifacts including orality, literacy and ICT. In another study, Chen and Zhou (2010) explored the ways of improving the creative writing strategies of young Chinese writers by using the graphical representations to stimulate and help the development of writing skills. They found that when Chinese children faced those Chinese characters they were not able to write, they used creative writing skills to communicate. The findings of the study have implications for the teaching of writing as well as the use of pictures in teaching young learners.

The daily increasing studies in the field of creativity show its centrality to learning and the many different ways in which this key concept can be investigated.

## **1.2. Statement of the problem**

Considering the above mentioned issues, creativity in education is not just an opportunity, but a necessity. In order to implement and foster innovative teaching and creative learning, educational stakeholders will have to understand what creativity for education is and what it entails, tackling thus myths or implicit theories about creativity.

In education, the term creativity is often used but seldom defined. A lack of definition of this concept might result in erroneous assumptions (Beghetto, 2005), leading educational actors (including teachers, students, parents and policymakers) to identify creativity only with talent, the arts and personal characteristics.

As Runco (2007) suggests, everyone holds a tacit knowledge about creativity which can have detrimental effects on any attempts to foster creativity in schools. This tacit and shared knowledge builds up a series of ‘implicit theories’ or myths about creativity, as Sharp (2004) sees them, which account for how ordinary people think about creativity as related to arts, as springing from natural talent, as being fun, as entailing originality, as needing no knowledge, as being a major breakthrough, as coming from free play and discovery. These theories which Runco calls ‘explicit theories’ differ from the ones held and scientifically tested by researchers. Research shows that creativity applies to every subject (or domain), it depends on education and training, it can be fun but it also entails hard work, it requires good field knowledge, and the development of thinking skills, it needs play and discovery (in the educational context) to be stimulated and guided by an expert (Ferrari, Cachia, & Punie, 2009). Knowledge and expertise are then unquestionable attributes of the creative eminent mind,

regardless of the debate about the amount and the kind of knowledge needed (Scott, 1999).

Therefore, regarding LCC ('little c' creativity) proposed by Craft (2005) and education, two kinds of background knowledge are needed by learners: firstly, a know-how of creativity, i.e. knowing how to think and how to perceive things in a different way, or how to make unforeseen and unexpected connections and secondly, they will need some subject or domain-related knowledge in order to be creative in a particular area (Ferrari, et al. 2009). As Morris (2006) stated the roots of a creative society are in basic education. There must be reform in our educational methods so that students are encouraged to ask about 'know-why' as well as 'know-how'. Over the last decade, creativity was included in the educational curriculum in numerous countries with the support of their governments, and teachers are trying to teach more creatively and nurture children's creativity. But unfortunately in our educational system the concept of creativity hasn't gained credit and is not yet well known. Teachers and students are not familiar with this concept scientifically, and consequently developing creativity has no place in syllabuses and schools' tasks and activities. Even those in higher ranks of educational decision makings are not aware of the advantages of infusing and implementing creativity into the school's curriculum. All these shortages call for more attempts in the part of our researching society to take the concept of creativity into consideration from all diverse facets and to make creative teaching and learning practical in Iranian schools.

Thus in this study, the researcher attempted her part by carrying out research on the relationship between learner creativity and the performance of written narrative tasks in the community of Iranian EFL university students. The results can then be implemented in creative teaching and learning in Iran and in particular for the improvement of the foreign language instruction.

### 1.3. Significance of the study

Thanks to the scholars' endeavors and the recent studies that have been carried out in the domain of creativity around the world, the value of creativity and its pivotal role in learning and teaching different fields and subjects especially languages is getting more and more apparent. Now it is known that creativity has a great impact on improving the educational system towards a more productive one. Developing critical and creative skills and nurturing citizens with creativity and innovative capacity are thus becoming worldwide due to the increasing global concern with 21st century skills (Li, 2010).

With regard to the importance of creativity in language classrooms, several reasons have been stated to indicate why it is worth making all the effort for introducing creativity into the language classroom. First of all, language use is a creative act: we transform thoughts into language that can be heard or seen. We are capable of producing sentences and even long texts that we have never heard or seen before. By giving learners creative exercises, we get them to practice an important sub-skill of using a language that is thinking creatively.

Compensation strategies (methods used for making up for lack of language in a communicative situation e.g. miming, drawing, paraphrasing used for getting meaning across) also use creative and often imaginative ways of expression. Learners will need these until they master the language. Besides, some people cannot learn at all if they are not allowed to be creative. They do not understand the point in doing a language activity for its own sake, for only practicing the language without a real content, purpose, outcome or even a product. Also most people become more motivated, inspired or challenged if they can create something of value; if they feel that in some ways what they do and how they do it reflect who they are. In the same vein, creativity improves self-esteem as learners can look at their own solutions to problems and their own products and see what they are able to achieve.

The changing methods of second language instruction, and prominence of communicative methods and task-based language teaching, which in many cases



employ tasks that require students to use their imagination, illuminate the value of creativity in teaching and learning area more than ever before. Creative work in the language classroom can lead to genuine communication and co-operation. Learners use the language to do the creative task, so they use it as a tool, in its original function. This prepares learners for using the language instrumentally outside the classroom. Creative tasks enrich classroom work and they make it more varied and more enjoyable by tapping into individual talents, ideas and thoughts – both the learners’ and the teacher’s.

Creative thinking is an important skill in real life. It is part of our survival strategies and it is a force behind personal growth and the development of culture and society (Craft, Jeffrey, & Leibling, 2001).

Moreover, Creative learning is defined as any learning privileging understanding over memorization; creativity is thus a transversal skill facilitating a specific form of learning, requiring understanding, meaning-making and active participation. Therefore, it demands new methods, formats and approaches. This means a shift of pedagogy is required, moving towards students’ centeredness and the idea of cooperative learning as a means to foster not only creativity but also other transversal skills, such as learning to learn skills (Ferrari et al. 2009). This in turn asks for an innovative role of the teacher. Teachers are key figures in implementing change; they can identify students’ creative strengths and foster their creativity, empower students to become more responsible for their own learning, help them to develop their own creative thinking or behavior (Cremin, 2009).

In the same vein, teachers can be highly creative in developing materials and approaches that take children’s interests and motivate their learning. It is what is called teaching creatively, by which we mean teachers using imaginative approaches to make learning more interesting, exciting and effective. This is a necessary part of all good teaching.

A major point that should be considered here is that teachers need support to understand and accept creativity in their practices. Young people’s creative

abilities are more likely to be developed in an atmosphere in which the teacher's creative abilities are properly engaged. To put it another way, teachers cannot develop the creative abilities of their pupils if their own creative abilities are suppressed. This too has implications for the curriculum and in particular for the type and amount of national prescription of what is taught and how, and for teacher training. Teaching for creativity is a demanding process which cannot be made routine. However, it is possible to identify some general principles (Craft & Jeffery, 2008).

It is also necessary to sustain creative learning and innovative teaching with a series of support mechanisms: technologies, culture and pedagogy.

Technologies are already accepted by the young generation, who are appropriating ICT-tools for instance, in new creative ways. It has been shown that with the appropriate use of technology, teachers can motivate students to learn both extrinsically and intrinsically (Cox, 1997). So new pedagogies have to take into account what it means to be educated in our time, as the overwhelming presence of technologies in our lives brings about a change in the way young people and children learn and understand. Creative learning is, therefore, increasingly relevant for the needs of the 21st century knowledge-based society.

There is no doubt that using a variety of technological tools, under the guidance of a skillful teacher creates a rich learning environment. Such an environment helps in exposing and preparing students for diversified experiences. This is the exposure that is required and necessary to nurture creativity, a point supported by Nixon (2003).

Considering the significance of this learner variable and since creativity is somewhat culture-bound (e.g. Cheng, 2010), the need for more attention on investigating this variable in the context of Iran seems eminent. Indeed a cultural shift is required in order to promote values that are not always recognized in a school environment, such as risk-taking, uniqueness and originality.

By casting an opener look on our schooling system, we can vividly observe the gap of creativity-raising activities in our schools' curriculum while it has found

its place in the educational systems of many other countries in which creativity is attended from the very young.

Although in the late 90s emphasis was towards increasingly centralized conceptions of classroom pedagogy, over the last decade it becomes an international trend to integrate creativity in curriculum frameworks. Teachers have been encouraged by numerous government reports and recommendations as well as support materials to adopt more creative approaches to the curriculum and teach creatively (Cremin, 2009). To this end, they are in need of effective methods to infuse creativity elements into their regular classrooms (Cheng, 2004). Regarding this increasing global concern, several Asian countries are now trying to reform the structure of their educational system with greater focus on developing critical and creative skills in the primary and secondary schools (Cheng, 2011). In spite of this worldwide endeavor, creativity has not found its proper position in Iran's educational system yet.

So here the researcher attempted at bridging this gap by carrying out research on the relationship between learner creativity and performance in written narrative tasks in the community of Iranian EFL students. The results can then be implemented in the improvement of the foreign language instruction in Iran. Applying the findings of the research in this area, kind of consciousness-raising program can be designed to make learners more aware of their potential creativity. Publishers and material developers can also include specific tasks in the textbooks by the aim of enhancing creative thinking and other features of creativity: creative fluency, originality, flexibility and elaboration (Dornyei, 2005). Information gained about the interplay of individual differences and various aspects of task performance could contribute to pedagogical decisions during task implementation and could help the selection of language teaching and testing tasks. For instance, previous research claims that tasks that involve the use of imagination and the generation of new ideas might provide creative learners with more chance to practice, that is, to produce more comprehensible output, which could lead to greater success in second language acquisition. Doing more research in this field, teachers likewise become more aware of the

concept of creativity, pay more attention to the existence and probable differences of this variable among their students, teach them techniques and strategies for taking more advantage of this asset of theirs in improving their performance and even competence in the language they are learning and even further in their real life activities.

#### **1.4. Purpose of the study**

The present research consists of two phases. In the first phase, it aimed to investigate the relationship between performance in written narrative task and the learner creativity as well as its four constituents (fluency, elaboration, flexibility and originality), while controlling for the differences in the participants' level of proficiency. Since written narrative tasks generally involve storytelling based on some cues (e.g. pictures), this task type seems to prepare an opportunity for learners to use their imagination and creativity, so sounds fit for this research. Then in the second phase of the study, the probable relationship between creativity and some output variables of written narratives, namely, accuracy, fluency, lexical complexity and grammatical complexity was examined. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

##### **1.4.1. Research questions**

R.Q.1. Is there any significant relationship between creativity and performance in written narrative tasks?

R.Q.2. Does creativity make any significant difference in high, mid and low groups with respect to written narrative task performance?

R.Q.3. Is there any significant relationship between creativity and accuracy of written narrative tasks?