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Creativity in Second Language Learning and Use: Theoretical Foundations and Practical Implications. A Literature Review

Abstract: This paper is a comprehensive literature review of the role of creativity in second language (L2) learning and use. It seeks to provide a theoretical background of the concept of creativity and show its practical relevance in the L2 context. The article begins with the conceptualisations of general creativity and narrows down to the concept of linguistic creativity and its instances in L2 use. Next, it presents the empirical research findings that point to an important role and benefits of creativity in L2 learning and use. The paper closes with pedagogical implications and methodological guidelines on enhancing creativity in the L2 classroom.

Keywords: creativity, linguistic creativity, creative language use, L2 learning, pedagogical implications

1. Introduction

Creativity is a fundamental property of the human mind (Boden 2004). Today many people are convinced that creativity is not a luxury but the key to success in nearly all areas of life, and therefore, it should be promoted and educated (Glăveanu and Kaufman 2019). Sawyer (2012) highlights the importance of creativity in different areas of life. On a very basic level, it allows humans to adapt and keep abreast of the rapid changes in the world. On a personal level, creativity allows people to generate useful and novel ideas, solve problems, and have a more fulfilling life. From a social standpoint, creativity is one of the central 21st century skills in the times of globalisation, innovation, communication, advanced information technologies and knowledge (Sawyer 2012).

Creativity has sparked scientific interest in multiple disciplines, such as psychology, arts, economy, management, education, linguistics, and recently second language acquisition. Researchers and practitioners propose various ways of enhancing creativity in different contexts (Sternberg 2019). However, what seems to be missing is a deep understanding of the concept of creativity and the theoretical underpinnings of creative practices. Given the growing interest in creativity in the L2 context, it seems necessary to take a closer look at the nature of creativity in language learning and use and its role in L2 learning. Therefore, this paper attempts to examine the concept of general and linguistic creativity from different theoretical perspectives, demonstrate the effects of creativity on the cognitive and linguistic development of L2 learners, and review the key factors and pedagogical approaches facilitating creativity in the L2 classroom.

2. Definitions, components, and levels of creativity

Creativity is a complex and multifaceted concept, so after over 70 years of creativity research, no comprehensive definition reflects its multidimensional nature (Runco and Jaeger 2012). As Maley (2015, 6) states, “the difficulty of finding an inclusive definition of creativity maybe owing to the latter’s forms and manifestations”. Nevertheless, a consensus has been reached over the two necessary (but not sufficient) components of novelty/originality and usefulness/value in a standard definition of creativity (Runco and Jaeger 2012). Novelty/originality implies something new, surprising, and innovative, while usefulness/value refers to ideas and products that are of high quality, relevant, and appropriate to the purpose for which they were created (Runco and Jaeger 2012). Apart from novelty/originality and usefulness/value, creativity encompasses many other components, such as domain competence, general intellect, divergence and experimentation, emotional involvement and persistence, spontaneity, dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity, independence, and social interaction (Jordanous and Keller 2016). These factors alone or in combination are the building blocks of creativity vital for creative achievements.

Perhaps most commonly, creativity is equated with divergent thinking, defined as the ability to generate multiple new ideas and solutions to a problem (Guilford 1967). Divergent thinking is contrasted with convergent thinking, which seeks correct, conventional, and logical rather than original solutions. Divergent and convergent thinking differ in quality, but both are central for novel and appropriate creative products and ideas (Guilford 1967). Divergent thinking is characterised by *fluency* (the ability to generate a large number of ideas or solutions within a limited time); *flexibility* (the ability to generate different categories of ideas and solutions to a problem); *originality* (the ability to produce original and statistically infrequent ideas); and *elaboration* (the ability to provide many details of an idea)

(Guilford 1967; Runco 2004). Guilford (1967) stressed that creativity is not synonymous with divergent thinking, which is only one crucial component of creativity. Creativity also involves analysis, synthesis, sensitivity to problems, reorganisation, redefinition, complexity, and the ability to solve problems. In this respect, Torrance (1988, 47) understands creativity “as the process of sensing difficulties, problems, gaps in information, missing elements, something askew, making guesses and formulating hypotheses about these deficiencies, evaluating and testing these guesses and hypotheses, possibly revising and retesting them; and finally communicating the results”. This definition implies that creativity emerges from the need to resolve a problem and find incomplete information.

Finally, people create products and ideas with different degrees of impact on personal and social life. Therefore, on the level of magnitude, one distinguishes between Big-C, Pro-c, small-c, and mini-c creativity (Kaufman and Beghetto 2009). Big-C or eminent creativity concerns ideas and artefacts that radically affect the course of human history and make profound changes. Big-C creativity stands for the extraordinary accomplishments of geniuses, renowned inventors, artists, and scientists. Pro-c or professional creativity is achieved after years of expertise and deliberate practice when one becomes a creative professional. Small-c creativity concerns ideas and products recognised as original by other people, but they are not as ground-breaking as in the case of Big-C creativity. Mini-c creativity relates to personally meaningful and new ideas. Mini-c creativity lies at the bottom of the developmental trajectory of creativity, which may turn into small-c and, later, even into Big-C creativity.

3. Theoretical perspectives on conceptualising creativity

The conceptualisations of creativity largely depend on the types of problems to be resolved and the theoretical perspectives applied.

Cognitive theories of creativity investigate how people create, i.e. what cognitive abilities and mental processes are involved in creative endeavours. Thus, from the cognitive perspective, creativity is generally viewed as an intellectual capacity (Boden 2004), divergent and convergent thinking (Guilford 1967), a problem-solving ability (Wallas 1926), and an ability to make associations between disparate ideas (Mednick 1962). Boden (2004, 1) states that creativity is “not a special ‘faculty’ but an aspect of human intelligence in general: in other words, it’s grounded in everyday abilities such as conceptual thinking, perception, memory, and reflective self-criticism”.

Personality studies on creativity investigate people’s traits and behaviours that affect creativity. Research findings show that the key characteristics of creative individuals are openness to experience, curiosity, determination and deep commitment, unconventionality, and attraction to complexity (Feist 1998).

Openness to experience – a personality trait in the Five-Factor Model (Costa and McCrae 1992) – has been consistently reported to have the most substantial impact on creativity. As Costa and McCrae (1992) explain, people with high openness enjoy ambiguous tasks, seek new experiences and sensations, and have better cognitive skills required for creativity.

Socio-cultural research on creativity stresses the role of social factors and the environment where people create. Amabile (1996) states that social factors (e.g. reward, competition, surveillance, peer pressure, modelling, feedback) directly influence creativity by affecting motivation. To enhance creativity, Amabile (1996) emphasises the importance of balancing stability and flexibility, creating interpersonal cohesiveness in a group, and encouraging risk-taking among group members. Creative potential is also developed through dialogue, perspective taking and reflexivity.

Componential theories of creativity emphasise a dynamic interplay of cognitive, personality, conative and emotional factors with the environment (Amabile 1983). According to the componential framework of creativity (Amabile 1983; 1996), three components are necessary for creativity: 1) domain-relevant skills, 2) creativity-relevant skills, and 3) task motivation. If one part is missing, then creativity is not likely to occur. An overwhelming body of research shows that intrinsic motivation is among the most potent drives for creativity (De Jesus et al. 2013). Creativity and motivation have a reciprocal relationship since creativity requires motivation and generates it during the creative process (Amabile 1996). In line with the confluence approach to conceptualising creativity, Plucker, Beghetto, and Dow (2004, 90) define creativity as “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”.

Given the above, creativity is defined and conceptualised depending on the focus of an investigation, theoretical approaches, and the level of impact. Some conceptualisations of creativity stress radical newness or problem reformulation, while others point to the generation of simple, imaginative ideas meaningful to the creator. Most definitions state that creativity must involve originality and value, while others highlight the interaction of cognitive, conative, personality and social factors. Despite the attempts to understand the nature of creativity, the concept remains vague and elusive (Runco and Jaeger 2012).

The following section will discuss the concept of linguistic creativity and different perspectives on the sources of creativity in language use.

4. Sources of linguistic creativity

Language is a powerful tool to exercise creativity in various contexts, including L2 learning. Several sources make linguistic creativity possible and relevant in

L2 learning and use. First, as posited by Carter (2004, 13), “linguistic creativity is not a property of exceptional people but an exceptional property of all people”. It implies that every L2 learner can be creative and use a second language creatively with proper feedback and guidance.

Second, language is inherently creative by nature. People can understand and use language in novel combinations instead of communicating with pre-learned phrases. This is due to our innate ability to create an infinite number of utterances from a finite stock of linguistic elements (Chomsky 1965). According to Chomsky (1965, 6), “An essential property of language is that it provides the means for expressing indefinitely many thoughts and for reacting appropriately in an indefinite range of new situations”. Furthermore, language is bound by a finite number of rules that allow for recursion or building a large variety of syntactically different sentences (Chomsky 1965). At first sight, rules appear as constraints to creativity. Yet, it is constraints and conventions that make creativity possible. Importantly, creativity requires the knowledge of rules and constraints to utilise them in original ways (Tin 2011). As Jones (2016, 21) puts it, language rules serve as “a necessary matrix against which the violation of them becomes meaningful”. Therefore, the knowledge of the L2 language system and its rules is a prerequisite for linguistic creativity in the L2 context.

Third, the creative potential of language is not limited to its generative properties or the language system alone. Zawada (2006) claims that creativity is primarily an active process of making, recreating, and reinterpreting meanings rather than simply being rule-governed. From this perspective, Zawada (2006, 235) defines linguistic creativity as “an essential and pervasive, but multi-dimensional characteristic of all human beings (...)”, and states that it is “primarily the activity of making new meaning by a speaker (...), and the recreation and re-interpretation of meaning(s) by a receiver. Linguistic creativity is secondarily observable as a feature or product in a language”.

From the usage-based perspective, creative language emerges simultaneously with the general emergence of structure in the process of acquiring and manipulating form-meaning pairings (Eskildsen 2017). Specifically, linguistic creativity develops through the use of simple words, chunks, and prefabricated expressions that gradually evolve into creative language. L2 users build their schematic constructions by finding commonalities among patterns in the process of social interaction. These commonalities are represented as “schemas sanctioning the use, understanding, and learning of novel utterances of the same kind” (Eskildsen 2017, 283). For example, to learn the plural forms of nouns, one needs to rote-learn the plural exemplars to establish a general plural schema, which later allows for novel pluralisations (Eskildsen 2017). All in all, creativity emerges from experience and one’s repertoire of existing constructions that L2 users combine in novel ways.

From the emergentist perspective, linguistic creativity evolves because language is emergent, spontaneous and co-constructed by the speakers as a dialogue

unfolds itself. As Maybin and Swann (2007, 491) state, “language users do not simply reproduce but recreate, refashion, and recontextualise linguistic and cultural resources in the act of communicating”. Effective communication involves the creative adaptation of language to the speaker and the social context flexibly. Using and adapting language in open conversational exchanges is stimulating and challenging for L2 learners. Since the rules of natural conversation are hard to teach explicitly, Maley and Kiss (2018) suggest systematically providing L2 learners with massive input, although it is insufficient on its own.

In sum, the learner’s inherent potential to be creative and the essential features of language make linguistic creativity possible. The next part focuses on the specific forms of linguistic creativity in second language use.

5. Instances of linguistic creativity in the L2 context

Linguistic creativity manifests in different forms and contexts. Linguistic creativity often tends to be associated with the literature domain. However, creative language use is not only linked to poetry or literary works of art. It is a prevalent feature of ordinary language, something that all of us are capable of to various degrees (Carter 2004; Maybin 2016). We use language and its features to express meaning and achieve our communicative goals. Depending on the intended effect and purpose of communication, we often rely on various linguistic devices such as rhyme, repetition, echoing, wordplay (puns, parodies), metaphor extension, slang, proverbs, humour, verbal duelling, hyperbole, alliteration, assonance, idioms, and speaker displacement of fixedness (Carter 2004).

Creativity in L2 learner language can be expressed incidentally or deliberately (Ellis 2016). Incidental creativity emerges when learners have no intention to be creative. Creative acts happen due to the need to communicate the meaning despite limited linguistic resources. In this sense, the L2 learner’s language is creative because it breaks the rules of the target language. It is evident, for example, in structural simplification (the omission of articles, auxiliary verbs, tense morphemes), semantic simplification (the omission of content words), the overextension of grammatical categories (when the constructions are broader than in the target language), or in the creation of non-existing categories (Ellis 2016).

On the other hand, L2 learners can deliberately use language creatively by manipulating L2 forms for fun or special effects. Deliberate creativity is particularly evident in language play. Language play involves the manipulation of sound patterns (rhymes, tongue twisters, alliteration), structures (parallelisms), and new units of meaning (neologisms) (Ellis 2016). The most common products of language play are poems, puns, riddles, jokes, advertisements, newspaper headings, songs, chants, taunts, nursery rhymes, nonsense rhymes, repetitions and folk stories (Cook 2000). In the L2 context, linguistic creativity mainly concerns the learner’s output or the

product of their L2 language. Creative abilities and linguistic creativity perform specific functions in the L2 learning process and contribute to the development of the L2 system in multiple ways that will be discussed below.

6. The benefits of creativity in second language learning and use

Linguistic creativity and creativity as an individual learner characteristic play an important role in L2 learners' linguistic development. According to Ellis (2016), language play, as an instance of linguistic creativity, leads to the creative construction of learners' L2 systems by activating the cognitive processes involved in analysing and manipulating utterances, such as deleting, adding, substituting, and rearranging chunks of language, and making analogies. Ellis (2016) emphasises that these processes are under learners' control, and they may be activated spontaneously in a specific situation or purposefully during instructional activities. Similarly, Tin (2013) states that language play and other creative language activities facilitate second language learning by encouraging L2 learners to transform their language and discover new meanings. Learners attempt to retrieve less accessible language, expand their existing vocabulary and grammar, and combine familiar words and phrases in new ways. These operations prevent cognitive fixation and make language memorable. Furthermore, Cho and Kim (2018) posit that language play develops L2 learners' creativity and raises their metalinguistic awareness, defined as "the ability to focus attention on language as an object in itself or to think abstractly about language and, consequently, to play with or manipulate language" (Jessner 2006, 42).

Tarone (2000) lists several other benefits of language play in L2 learning. First, it lowers affective barriers, such as anxiety, and triggers associations that leave long-lasting traces in the memory. Cook (2000) emphasises the mnemonic power of language play by showing how learners could recall the language encoded through language play despite not using it for years. Second, language play develops socio-linguistic competence, which involves the appropriation of various registers in speech communities where the learner belongs or would like to belong. It gives learners freedom of expression and allows them to construct their own identities without fearing negative consequences. Third, language play destabilises and restructures the learner's interlanguage because, during language play, learners notice linguistic forms and gradually replace their incorrect L2 forms with the correct ones (Tarone 2000). Furthermore, playfulness in language learning can create a state of "flow" or a state of complete absorption into an activity (Csikszentmihalyi 1997), which is a strong motivational factor in the learning process. Finally, the ludic function of language play allows learners to appreciate language as a whole and have fun (Crystal 2001).

Empirical research on the association between creativity as an individual learner difference and different aspects of L2 learning is scarce and non-conclusive.

In terms of the association between creativity and bi-/multilingualism, research shows that bi-/multilinguals outperform monolinguals on different measures of creativity because of bi-/multilinguals' enhanced executive functions, higher generative capacity, and experience with multiple cultures (Dijk et al. 2019). Moreover, bi-/multilinguals have greater cognitive control (Bialystok, Craik, and Luk 2012), enhanced cognitive flexibility (Kharkhurin 2017), and better problem-solving abilities (Leikin, Tovli, and Woldo 2020) than monolinguals.

Regarding the connection between creativity and L2 skills, only a handful of studies explored the role of creativity in L2 speaking and writing. Suzuki et al. (2022) investigated the role of creativity in L2 speaking performance in an argumentative and a picture narrative task. Creativity, measured as a cognitive variable (divergent and convergent thinking) and a personality variable (openness to experience), was correlated with the aspects of speaking performance (fluency, complexity, accuracy, and discourse measures). The results showed that convergent and divergent thinking were associated with discourse aspects of speech (cohesion as indexed by the number of causal and logical connectives) in both tasks, while the total number of words produced was related to divergent thinking fluency in the argumentative task. The personality dimension of creativity (openness to experience) was related to the increased syntactic and lexical complexity in the picture narrative task. The overall conclusion is that creativity affects the lexicogrammatical and discourse aspects of L2 speech production. Suzuki's et al. (2022) findings are similar to the results of Albert and Kormos' (2004) study on the relationship between creativity and L2 speaking performance in picture narrative tasks. Divergent thinking fluency was positively correlated with the total number of words and originality was positively correlated with the frequency of temporal connectives. Originality and the quantity of talk were found unrelated. The findings suggest that creativity, understood as divergent thinking, affects the cohesion of output and the amount of speech. Zabihi, Rezazadeh, and Vahid Dastjerdi (2013) found a positive correlation between creative fluency and L2 fluency in individual writing, and a negative correlation between creative originality and L2 fluency in both individual and collaborative task performance.

As for creativity and language proficiency, Ottó (1998) established significant positive correlations between L2 proficiency, operationalised as L2 English grades, and total creativity, measured as ideational fluency, associational fluency, sensitivity to problems, and originality. Conversely, Albert (2006) found no link between creativity and L2 proficiency. Wang and Cheng's (2016) study indicated that English proficiency significantly predicted metaphoric creativity. Yang et al. (2021) revealed that L2 proficiency influenced bilinguals' cognitive creativity both directly and indirectly through cognitive flexibility, which had a mediating effect on this relationship.

Finally, Fernández-Fontecha (2021) explored the link between creativity and L2 lexical production. The results demonstrated a significant positive correlation

between global creativity (fluency, originality, and flexibility) and semantic fluency. Highly creative participants produced more varied and uncommon responses than learners with lower creativity scores.

Taken together, research on L2 creativity is still in its infancy, but the results suggest a predominantly positive relationship between creativity and L2 skills, proficiency, vocabulary acquisition and lexical production. Therefore, creativity may be a potentially important individual difference explaining learner variation, but more research is needed to confirm the existing findings. Pedagogical implications and strategies for facilitating the learner's creative potential are the focus of the concluding section.

7. Pedagogical implications and methodological guidelines

An L2 classroom presents an excellent opportunity for creative expression because language itself is creative, and every person has creative potential. As previously discussed, creativity and language play facilitate L2 learning in multiple ways. Based on the empirical findings mentioned before, creative play increases L2 learners' metalinguistic awareness and noticing of linguistic forms, increases motivation and lowers anxiety. It allows learners to experiment with language, recontextualise L2, and step beyond the known language forms and common ideas. Enhanced levels of creativity have a positive effect on oral and written task performance, learners' generative capacity, and semantic and associative fluency. These are some of the reasons that make creativity pedagogically relevant in the L2 context. Considering the cognitive, affective and sociolinguistic benefits of creativity in L2 learning and use, learners should receive plenty of opportunities to use L2 creatively.

Communicative and task-based teaching approaches, which involve idea generation, fact-finding, problem-solving, and negotiation of meaning, are particularly conducive to developing and exercising L2 learners' creativity. Tasks and activities that are student-centred, interaction-based, and open-ended expand learners' resourcefulness, flexibility, and productivity of thought. At the same time, complex communicative tasks that rely on creativity can present difficulties for learners with low creativity levels and negatively affect L2 learners' task performance and overall linguistic development (Ottó 1998). Therefore, teachers should explicitly teach about creativity, model creative behaviour, and integrate open-ended and enquiry-oriented tasks into meaningful language practice. According to Fasko (2001), creative pedagogy is based on an enquiry-discovery approach, divergent and convergent thinking, problem-solving and problem finding, and modelling creative behaviour.

Literary texts of different genres (e.g. novels, short stories, poems, comics, songs) are powerful tools for enhancing L2 learners' creativity. Piasecka (2018)

observed that L2 learners find it challenging but incredibly rewarding to work with poetry since it engages the whole person cognitively and emotionally. It allows L2 learners to notice unusual language patterns, awakens their imagination and sensitivity, and develops their L2 knowledge and proficiency. Similarly, Tin's (2011) study shows that writing poetry with high formal constraints results in a more complex and novel L2 language. Tin (2011) concludes that creative language use stretches the learner's linguistic and conceptual world at lexical, syntactical, paradigmatic and syntagmatic levels.

There are three factors to consider when facilitating creativity in the L2 classroom: the teacher's personality and behaviour, environment, and strategies for developing creativity. Richards (2013) characterises creative teachers as knowledgeable, confident, critically reflective, flexible, non-conformist, and risk-takers. They have a rich repertoire of interesting, challenging and meaningful resources; their teaching approaches and techniques are varied and non-repetitive, and they can create effective surprises. Creative teachers encourage learners to actively explore ideas without the fear of being ridiculed, make connections, critically reflect, collaborate with peers, and take ownership of their learning.

With reference to the environment, creativity is inhibited in rigid and test-like conditions (Runco 2004). In contrast, creativity thrives in an environment marked by autonomy and freedom of decision. Such learning environments are characterised by good management, encouragement, positive cooperation, feedback and appreciation, and sufficient resources and time to complete the task or solve the problem (Amabile 1996). Cremin and Barnes (2010, 475) state that the classroom climate for developing creativity should be both "highly active and relaxed; supportive and challenging; confident and speculative; playful and serious; focused and fuzzy; individualistic and communal; understood personally and owned by all; non-competitive and ambitious".

In terms of the strategies for facilitating creativity in the L2 classroom, Maley (2015) recommends trying things out instead of applying ready-made formulas (e.g. doing the opposite), setting constraints (e.g. on activities, time, number of words); making unusual combinations and new associations, withholding information, developing divergent thinking, and implementing a wide variety of materials and resources. Helpful information about creative practices and creative activities in the L2 classroom, such as creative writing, storytelling, drama, literature, using coursebooks creatively, teaching grammar creatively, and fostering creativity in communication can be found in Maley and Peachey (2015).

In sum, integrating and facilitating creativity in L2 teaching and learning is a complex process that requires a combination of factors such as teacher personalities, attitudes and behaviours, a supportive environment, and finally, a rich collection of resources and strategies for creative L2 teaching and learning.

8. Conclusion

Creativity is highly valued in many areas of modern life. The second language classroom seems suitable for unlocking learners' creative potential in general and in L2 use. This article attempted to show what creativity means in different theories and contexts, what benefits it brings to L2 development, and what implications it has for L2 teaching. Solid theoretical knowledge about the nature of creativity and its effects on different aspects of L2 learning is a necessary prerequisite for integrating creativity in the classroom. It will help teachers recognise creativity in learners and themselves, reassess their teaching practice, make sound professional decisions that encourage creativity, and teach the essential content creatively. On the other hand, learners will find learning more challenging, but also more enjoyable and rewarding.

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