

Creativity and English Language Teaching: from inspiration to implementation

A. Maley and T. Kiss.

Palgrave Macmillan 2018, 338 pp., £72 (hard copy) £60.25 (e-book)

ISBN 978-1-137-46728-7

ISBN 978-1-137-46729-4 (e-books)

This overview of creativity as theory, research, practice, defies the repeated cry that the term is indefinable and unhelpful as a concept: its sub-text is that, however we perceive or interpret the term, creativity is significant for researchers, teachers and classrooms, and it is high time we arrived at some shared explanations as to what it really means. 'Creativity' is well-served inside and outside the ELT profession by publications which tend to take one of three perspectives: creativity research, history and theory, such as Kaufman and Sternberg (2010) and the panoramic Pope (2005); publications in which creative teachers explain and share their best practice, such as Maley and Peachey (2015); and publications which offer practical creative activities, such as Wright (2014) and Pugliese (2010). What is less easy to find is a publication such as this one, which does all three, and which interrogates painstakingly the join between them.

The book is divided into four sections: focus on creativity theories and their educational application; focus on the creative teacher and person; focus on classroom procedures and processes; and finally focus on the research literature, both current research and suggestions for the future. Each of these sections addresses one of the links on the chain from theory to classroom practice. The book's approach is organised and systematic, with each section and chapter within it making its purpose entirely clear, and delivering on this purpose with painstaking breadth and precision.

The chapters are structured as free-standing essays, each one comprehensively referencing the guiding literature, and providing helpful checklists, practical ideas and summaries in easy-to-read boxes and bullet points.

The whole enterprise offers reassurance that we can at last find a common language to talk about creativity. It is refreshing to be reminded in the first section (Chapter 3) of how many educators through time complained about the stifling effect of education – such as Jespersen in 1904, and Holt in 1982; and of the educational experiments which sought to reverse this, such as the Waldorf, Montessori, and Summerhill projects. The book reminds us of projects which succeeded – such as the Hole in the Wall (Mitra 2011), and the several that failed, having been touted as the 'holy grail of the best method' (Chapter 5 p. 112). Chapter 5 summarises alternatives to the stifling

classroom, from macro-solutions such as technology, testing and materials, to micro-solutions such as Fanselow's 'breaking rules' (1987) or Graham's jazz chants (1978). One of the many strengths of the book is that no stone is left unturned to reveal meaning; so we move from micro-solutions, to the multiple ways these are manifested in classroom materials and resources (Chapter 6). Brief as each entry is, and listed as they are in no particular order, they still offer the reader an inventory of creative possibilities tried and tested (with varying degree of success) by other teachers.

The second section, focusing on the creative teacher and human being, acknowledges that creativity is not just about a set of strategies and competences, but about the whole person – their thinking, mindset, approach to life. These chapters are enriched by the research of the authors themselves, such as the survey in Chapter 7 where 185 language teachers from three major cultural groups were asked their views of the creative language teacher. The study interestingly found a great deal of consensus across all these cultural groups; minor differences included more reference to enjoyment of learning and learner-centredness amongst western participants. The chapter gives the reader cause for thought regarding what it means, not only to teach in a creative way, but to manifest this quality oneself. Chapter 8 takes a non-disciplinary approach, and looks at the whole person outside the classroom in a kind of 'self-help' set of principles for developing creativity.

These qualities of comprehensiveness and guidance for the reader are both the strength and also a possible concern about the book. The clarity of its purpose, realised throughout its structure in whole and parts, is a gift to the teacher designing a course in creativity at undergraduate or postgraduate level. However, being comprehensive almost to a fault, there are some areas, for example CLIL, or the 'Assessment for learning' initiative, that are given such brief attention that the reader hardly has time to make sense of them. This concern to thoroughly inform the reader leads to a 'teacherliness' in the approach which makes it potentially predictable and slow-moving. Several of the chapters are structured as useful lists: for example, key creative educators (Chapter 3), key creative resources (Chapter 6), creative classroom procedures in section 3 (Chapter 11). These are transparent and trainer/teacher-friendly, but it means some of the big ideas are reduced to short helpful 'soundbites', rather than discursive journeys into new territory. For example, the section on creativity theory (Chapter 2) is organised according to the theorists themselves, listed one by one, rather than the ideas they have generated. This means that themes such as freedom versus discipline, notions of creativity and play, flow and happiness, re-appear in different incarnations depending on which theorist refers to them, and we lose the chance to focus on the idea itself, and its ebb and flow over time. Similarly, section 3 takes us on a rapid tour of the typical behaviour of creative teachers, 12 guidelines for the creative classroom, 7 principles for developing more creativity and 14 generative procedures. This is a cornucopia of possibilities that will feed a teacher for a lifetime. But again, this is presented as lists, and there is a danger in that it might encourage the

teacher to pick ideas from a candybox of ingredients, rather than follow their own creative direction in dynamic response to their learners. The guidelines perhaps work best when they are presented as an example of what creative teachers actually do (such as Tan Bee Tin's four P's on p. 225), rather than as a highway code of what they *should* do.

Section 4, focusing on research, generously leads the reader through summaries of referenced research, acting as an annotated bibliography for the reader through many of the key works in the field. Chapter 14, most interestingly, takes 62 of these references and systematically maps how they are linked together. Chapter 15 then opens up for the reader gaps in research, inviting researchers to take up the baton with new enquiries, such as the lack of research on collaborative creativity. There is little room in this fast-flowing tide of knowledge, however, to connect these potential topics with those that have gone before, other than quick pointers back to an odd reference in former chapters. As these chapters are 'atomised' and free-standing, we miss an overall bibliography at the end that summarises the literature base for the book as a whole.

There is some slightly odd attention paid to literature which is *not* valued by the authors, such as the unpicking of the Routledge handbook (Jones 2016) in Chapter 4, explaining why each chapter is *not* of interest to the creative teacher. There are other occasional flashes of visceral judgements on literature that meets the authors' disapproval, such as Swann and Maybin's (2007) introduction to a special issue of *Applied Linguistics* (p. 78) or 'New Age enthusiasts' (p. 29). Perhaps this non-preferred literature is included in the interests of being comprehensive; but these flashes of bias stand out because the approach otherwise is of scrupulous thoroughness and balance.

In such a panoramic overview, it seems unfair to suggest omissions. But if I were to add other landmarks to this panorama, it might be the perspective of the many creative artists who have explored their own creativity, such as Sartre, Chagall, Virginia Woolf, Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney, Orhan Pamuk. It is also interesting that we have a section dedicated to the creative teacher, but not a section dedicated to the creative learner. There are references to the good language learner, but not to the qualities and strategies for developing as a learner in the same kind of 'self-help' way we have seen in Chapter 8 for the teacher. This suggests overall that the authors see teachers as their target audience, rather than teachers or students who might also be learners.

In spite of these provisos and questions, the book as a whole offers us a unique synthesis of perspectives, and works hard to do so, presenting its case with precision and scholarship. It rehabilitates the term 'creativity', which is often used ambiguously, or in contradictory ways, and looks at it from many angles, leaving no stone (or very few) unturned in seeking to explain it. The book is to be recommended, both for dipping into as creative sustenance, or for following systematically as part of an ELT training or research programme. For all readers it offers a rich store of information that

can lead somewhere: to a more creative classroom, theorised materials, principles for becoming more creative, new research questions. Depending on whether you are a teacher, teacher trainer, university lecturer, or materials writer, there is something in this store that will inspire, inform and perhaps even lead to change.

References

- Fanselow, J. (1987) *Breaking rules* Harlow UK: Longman
- Graham, C. (1978) *Jazz Chants* New York: Oxford University Press
- Holt, J. C. (1982) *How children fail* New York: Merloyd Lawrence Books
- Jespersen, O. (1904) *How to teach a foreign language* Allen: London
- Jones, R.H. (ed.) (2016) *Routledge handbook of language and creativity* London: Routledge
- Kaufman, C. and Sternberg, R.J. (eds.) (2010) *The Cambridge Handbook of creativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Maley A. and Peachey, N. (2014) *Creativity in the English language classroom* London: British Council
- Mitra, S. (2011) Can kids teach themselves?
http://www.ted.com/talks/sugata_mitra_shows_how_kids_teach_themselves.html.
- Pope, R. (2005) *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice*. London and New York: Routledge
- Pugliese, C. (2010) *Being creative: the challenge of change in the classroom* London: Delta
- Swann, J. and Maybin. J. (2007) Introduction: Language creativity in everyday contexts. *Applied Linguistics*, 28 (4), 491- 496.
- Wright, A. (2014) *Creativity in the classroom*. Gödöllő, Hungary: ILI Press

The Reviewer

Jane Spiro is Principal Lecturer in Education and TESOL at Oxford Brookes University. Her main research interests include language teaching and creative arts, especially poetry and literature; the development of the reflective teacher, and action research. Her publications include *Changing Methodologies in ELT* (Edinburgh University Press 2013); *Linguistic and Cultural Innovation in Schools* (with E. Crisfield) (Palgrave Macmillan 2018) learner literature and creative resources for teachers, *Creative Poetry Writing* and *Storybuilding* (Oxford University Press 2004, 2007).

Email jspi@brookes.ac.uk