



Exploring Creativity in TESOL Professional Learning

by [Laura Baecher](#)

How do you define creativity? Is it some level of imagination only some of us are lucky to be born with, or is it a skill we can cultivate and strengthen? In their [2018 TESOL Journal special issue](#), coeditors Judy Sharkey and Yuliya Ardasheva ask “What is the role of creativity in enhancing students’ learning? What is the role of creativity in teachers’ professional development?” In this perpetual pandemic era, all of us have certainly been creative, innovative, and ingenious problem-solvers as our external conditions have demanded new solutions to meet the challenges of remote and distanced learning and teaching. However, we still tend to associate “creativity” with artistic and aesthetic activities and literary and theater-based components in our curriculum and instruction. But, as Jones and Richards (2016) assert:

Rather than a characteristic of exceptional teachers or learners or an optional ingredient that teachers can add in to “spice up” their teaching, creativity...is a necessary component of all teaching and learning and has a particularly important role in the teaching and learning of languages. (p. xiii)

Everybody has a creative potential
and from the moment you can express
this creative potential,
you can start changing the world.”

—Paulo Coelho

According to Runco and Jaeger (2012), creativity involves the ability to generate original ideas that are useful and meaningful, and it is consistently named as one of the most important and sought-after capacities in the workplace. It would make sense then that professional development would have a key role to play in teachers’ ability to increase creative capacity among students, but the preparation of educators to deepen creativity—either their own or their students—is

sorely lacking. In fact, there is very little professional development focused on creativity for teachers either at the preservice or in-service professional development stages for teachers to take policies that emphasize students' creativity into their own practice (Patston et al.). Without attention to creativity, educators may well persist in the notion that creativity is something you are born with rather than a skill that can be nurtured.

Challenges to Teacher Creativity

As with all areas of practice, teachers' beliefs are the most significant barrier to overcome in developing new approaches and being willing to try new methods. Bereczki and Kárpáti (2018) argue that most teachers believe that creativity is something akin to talent or giftedness, and, as an inherent quality, is beyond conscious development in oneself or in one's students. Cultural notions and institutional value placed on conformity work against teachers developing their own creativity or that of their students. Teachers often focus their energies on behavior management and arriving at single right answers and are uncomfortable with unconventionality, which leads to avoidance of risk-taking (Kettler et al., 2018), a necessary condition for creativity to flourish.

Obstacles to teacher creativity include the following:

- Boxed and scripted teacher curricula
- Strict lesson planning protocols
- Supervisory feedback that seeks uniformity in instruction
- Lack of materials and resources
- School schedules that are rigid
- Physical or virtual classroom set-ups that are inflexible
- Teacher isolation and lack of models of creativity
- Lack of time for teacher collaboration and ideation
- High amounts of paperwork and compliance-oriented activities
- Teacher stress and burnout
- Lack of reward for innovation
- Positioning of teachers as technicians rather than creatives
- Absence of professional development to nourish teachers' own creativity
- Anxiety about not being creative and a fixed mindset about creativity

Professional Development Can Enhance Teacher Creativity

What is inspiring is to know that just like any skill, creativity is not fixed—it can grow and blossom, but it needs to first be seeded and nurtured. Here are a few suggestions to get started either on your own creativity reflection journey or if you lead professional learning for pre- or in-service educators.

Start With Some Questions

Al Khars's 2013 study of creativity among English teachers in Kuwait began with discovering how teachers viewed creativity. You might reflect on any of these possible queries:

- What do you think is the meaning of creativity in the field of English language teaching?
- What are the benefits of creativity for you as an English language teacher?
- Do you see the differences between creativity and innovation?
- Do you consider yourself a creative teacher, and what are your examples of being a creative English language teacher?
- What are the aspects of English language teaching which require creativity?
- What are the factors that encourage you to be more creative in English language teaching in your context? What are the factors that suppress creativity or are an obstacle to creative English language teaching from your point of view?
- How important is your relationship with learners to your creativity?

Define Your Goals

Anderson et al. (2022) suggests that you should consider three aspects—teaching creatively, teaching for creativity, and creative learning.

- *Teaching creatively* involves teachers being willing to take risks, being curious about students’ interests and ideas, and being open to unknown possible outcomes. This is a sort of “unplanning” approach quite different from what we are used to.
- *Teaching for creativity* relies on planning, with intentional opportunities for students to think in new ways or to gain understanding through different modes or media.
- *Creative learning*, for instance through arts integration into the curriculum, offers students creative outlets for generating their own content and sharing their learning.

In Anderson et al.’s (2022) work with teacher professional development for creativity, by engaging teachers in creative processes themselves—from collage, to drama-based activities, to the use of metaphors—all as routines, they found that teachers could much more readily bring those approaches to students. A few small creative routines to “habituate creative engagement” as they put it, could involve:

- Designing an avatar that represents your ideal teacher self
- Drawing childhood memories of you as a student in school
- Creating a new gesture and teaching it to others
- Linking abstract art to concepts being discussed
- Reforming an existing poem to express a new idea

Disrupt the Usual Ways of Thinking


Fanselow’s seminal work encouraged us to “do the opposite,” which is one of Maley and Kiss’s (2018) key moves to encourage creative thinking, as codified in his book [Creativity in Language Teaching](#). In a teacher professional development activity, teachers could be given an activity like the one below to provoke, in a playful way, teachers to consider the possibilities if asked to “do the opposite” of their usual routines. This can be an entry point to encourage teachers to apply creative thinking to practices that have become unquestioned.

Do the Opposite* (Divergent Thinking Practice for Teachers!)

Instead of the teacher:	Try:
Teaching from the front of the room,	
Grading the homework,	
Checking attendance by calling names,	
Telling students the objectives of the lesson,	
Pre-teaching vocabulary,	
Telling students "good job",	
Talking for the majority of time during a lesson,	
Planning the next-day's lesson,	

Ideas here generated based on Fanselow, J. F. (1988). "Let's see" Contrasting conversations about teaching. *Tesol Quarterly*, 22(1), 113-130.

Created by Laura Baecher, 2022.
Creative commons, attribution, noncommercial, share alike.



Available [for download](#) and reuse.

TESOL researchers working in Hong Kong noted that creativity is a vital part of a systematic change for educational reform (Forrester & Hui, 2007), especially in contexts seeking to modify traditional teaching approaches by reenvisioning teachers' roles as facilitators of learning rather than transmitters of content. It's time to consider how to make creativity a core component of teacher learning experiences.

References

Al Khars, D. A. (2013). *Creativity in English language teaching in Kuwait: A TESOL study* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Exeter.

<https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/handle/10871/13928>

Anderson, R. C., Katz-Buonincontro, K., Boussetot, T., Mattson, D., Beard, N., Land, J., & Livie, M. (2022). How am I a creative teacher? Beliefs, values, and affect for integrating creativity in the classroom. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 110, 103583.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103583>

Berezki, E. O., & Kárpáti, A. (2018). Teachers' beliefs about creativity and its nurture: A systematic review of the recent research literature. *Educational Research Review*, 23, 25–56.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2017.10.003>

Forrester, V., & Hui, A. (2007). Creativity in the Hong Kong classroom: What is the contextual practice? *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 2(1), 30–38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2006.10.003>

Jones, R. H., & Richards, J. C. (2016). Preface. In R. H. Jones & J. C. Richards, *Creativity in language teaching: Perspectives from research and practice* (pp. xiii–xiv). Routledge.

Kettler, T., Lamb, K. N., Willerson, A., & Mullet, D. R. (2018). Teachers' perceptions of creativity in the classroom. *Creativity Research Journal*, 30(2), 164–171. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10400419.2018.1446503>

Maley, A., & Kiss, T. (2018). *Creativity and English language teaching: From inspiration to implementation*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Patston, T. J., Kaufman, J. C., Cropley, A. J., & Marrone, R. (2021). What is creativity in education? A qualitative study of international curricula. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 32(2), 207–230.

Runco, M. A., & Jaeger, G. J. (2012). The standard definition of creativity. *Creativity Research Journal*, 24(1), 92–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10400419.2012.650092>

Dr. Laura Baecher is professor of TESOL at Hunter College, City University of New York. Her interests relate to teacher learning, observation and coaching for English language teaching, and professional development in TESOL. Her recent books are *Reflecting on Problems of Practice in TESOL* and *Video in Teacher Learning: Through their Own Eyes*. She is the *Professional Development Blog* author for TESOL, has served as the TESOL International's *Teacher Education Interest Section Chair*, as an *English Language Specialist for the U.S. Department of State*, and as *president of New York State TESOL*. The winner of multiple awards for teaching and service, she is committed to advancing the professional knowledge base of educators in ways that build community and sustain collaboration and reflection.