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Seven pillars of creativity in primary ELT

Carol Read

Introduction

Creativity is often described as thinking ‘out of the box’, coming up with fresh, divergent responses, original ideas and objects, new solutions to problems, or ways of looking at problems.

Children who learn English as a foreign language at primary school may have limited language skills but they come to class full of creative potential. By establishing a classroom environment in which the development of creativity is fostered from the start, the experience of learning another language is considerably enhanced. Through the integration of creative thinking in English lessons, children develop relevant cognitive skills, such as observing, questioning, comparing, contrasting, imagining and hypothesising, that they need in all areas of the curriculum. They also develop metacognitive skills, such as an ability to evaluate and reflect critically on their own performance and learning outcomes. In addition, the development of creativity in the primary ELT classroom:

- increases children’s engagement and motivation in studying a foreign language
- makes language learning enjoyable and memorable
- gives children a sense of ownership and a feeling of success
- allows for divergent responses and, for children who may be strong in other areas of the curriculum, e.g. art, music or dance, to use these to support their learning
- promotes children’s ability to think in a flexible way
- provides a personalised challenge
- develops qualities such as patience, persistence and resourcefulness
- provides a basis for the development of more sophisticated, conceptual and abstract creative thinking in future.

Foundations of creativity in primary ELT

When laying the foundations for developing children’s creativity in the primary foreign language classroom, there are a number of general factors to keep in mind:

- Creativity doesn’t happen in a vacuum. There is always something that stimulates and underpins the generation of children’s original thinking, such as an idea, picture, text, story, object, question or problem, or some combination of these.
- Creative thinking arises from the emotional quality of children’s engagement and involvement in an activity. This leads to a state of ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) in which children’s attention is positively focused on a personalised goal and they feel motivated to achieve a particular creative outcome.
- Children need a framework in which to develop creative thinking skills, and it is usually helpful to provide a model or build up an example outcome with the whole class first. The framework delimits the scope of an activity and allows children to focus on their ideas. The model or example provides necessary language support.
- Creativity involves the opportunity to play with ideas freely and spontaneously. At the same time, it involves disciplined thinking, curiosity, and attention to detail and effort. It also needs to be underpinned by the development of specific strategies and skills.
- Creativity is best fostered by the development of a ‘growth mind-set’ (Dweck, 2006) in which children are encouraged to believe that they can improve their performance and achieve better outcomes through their own effort, persistence and hard work. One way this can be achieved is through constructive feedback and praise, which focuses on the effort children make to be creative rather than on their innate talents (*ibid.*).

Big 'C' and little 'c' creativity

There are two types of creativity that have been identified in an educational context: big 'C' and little 'c' creativity (Craft, 2005). In the primary ELT classroom, big 'C' creativity refers to learning outcomes, which are new and original for a child in terms of their current age, stage of development and level of English, and are valued as such by the teacher. An example of big 'C' creativity in a primary ELT classroom is the following poem about a conker by two 11-year-old boys (Read, 2007: 83):

Conker
From a chestnut tree
In autumn
On the ground
Round and brown
Hard and shiny
The winter is coming
I feel cold and sad.

Little 'c' creativity refers to the process of children creatively constructing and communicating meaning in the everyday, interactional context of the classroom using the foreign language repertoire that they currently have available. This kind of creativity involves children in predicting, guessing, hypothesising and risk-taking as well as using non-verbal communication, such as mime and gesture.

In order to establish a classroom environment where creativity thrives, it is important to provide opportunities for both kinds of creativity. In the case of big 'C' creativity, this means planning and structuring lessons in ways that systematically equip children with the skills and strategies they need in order to be able to achieve a creative outcome in relation to the topic and their current language level. This may be expressed through writing, acting, music, art, dance, multimedia, or any combination of these, and the outputs may take a wide variety of forms such as poetry, riddles, stories, role plays, sketches, dances, posters, paintings, videos or multimedia project presentations. In the case of little 'c' creativity, it is important to provide frequent opportunities where you 'loosen the reins' in terms of language practice and children experience using any and all the language they currently have available in real communicative situations in a variety of contexts. When given regular opportunities to construct and communicate their own personal meanings, children usually prove creative and resourceful, and this helps to develop their fluency and self-confidence.

By using English as the main language of communication in the classroom, you will naturally provide opportunities for little 'c' creativity. It is also worth systematically planning for little 'c' creativity in lessons at appropriate moments, such as when you brainstorm what children know about a topic, find out their opinions, or ask for their personal response to a story. By responding to children's meanings, and using techniques such as remodelling and recasting, rather than insisting on language accuracy and correcting every mistake, you will encourage children to use and acquire language in a natural, creative and memorable way.

Seven pillars of creativity

The establishment of a classroom learning environment, in which both types of creativity flourish, needs careful nurturing and doesn't just happen by itself. The seven pillars of creativity are a series of generic considerations, which enable you to develop creativity in your classroom whatever age and level of children you teach, and whether or not you are using a coursebook and digitally sophisticated materials or no technology at all. The seven pillars are rooted in educational literature on creativity (Craft, 2005; Fisher, 2005a; Fisher, 2005b) but above all based on many years of classroom experience. The section on each pillar contains a rationale for its inclusion followed by practical ideas and activities for immediate classroom use.

Pillar one: build up positive self-esteem

Self-esteem is characterised by five components: a sense of security, a sense of identity, a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose and a sense of personal competence (Reasoner, 1982). If children feel threatened or insecure and lack a sense of personal competence, this acts as a barrier to creativity. By building up children's positive self-esteem through recognising their individual strengths, valuing their contributions, respecting divergent views and establishing a classroom community in which collaboration and interaction are the norm, children are more likely to engage in the kind of fluent and flexible thinking, as well as the willingness to take risks, that characterise creativity.

You can build up children's positive self-esteem in ways that permeate your whole teaching approach and transmit to children that you care about them and value them as members of the class. You can also use a range of specific activities and procedures to build up different aspects of self-esteem. Three examples are:

Self-esteem fan

Use this activity to help children to develop a positive sense of identity.

- Give each child a sheet of A4 or A5 paper. Ask children to fold the paper concertina-style to make a fan and demonstrate this. They should have as many folds as letters in their first name.
- Children write the letters of their name at the top of each section of the fan. They think of a positive adjective about themselves, which starts with each letter, and write this vertically on the fan, e.g. *Helena – Hardworking, Enthusiastic, Lively, Energetic, Nice, Active.*
- Children compare their fans and say why they have chosen the adjectives, e.g. *I think I'm hardworking because I always do my homework.*
- Children illustrate and colour their fans. The fans can be displayed and also used or referred to whenever children need reminding of their positive characteristics.

Circle time

Use circle time to personalise learning, foster a sense of security and belonging, and encourage social skills such as listening to others, turn-taking, cooperating and showing respect for views which are different from your own.

- Children sit or stand in a circle. Have a soft ball or other item ready to pass round the circle.
- Children take turns to pass the ball or other item round the circle and complete a sentence. This can relate to a text, topic, story or personal feelings and be graded appropriately to the age and level of the children, e.g. *I like..., I feel happy/sad/angry when..., I think the story/video/poem is..., I think wild animals are in danger/we need to save water/global warming is worrying because...* Rules of circle time are that you only speak when it is your turn, you can say 'Pass' if you have nothing to say, or use your mother tongue if you need to. When the focus of circle time is on a particular topic or issue, such as the latter examples above, you may like to note children's responses on the board in a mind map (see Pillar six) and use this afterwards to get children to write about the topic.

Word tennis

Use a version of this game to reinforce children's sense of personal competence as well as listening and turn-taking skills.

- Divide children into pairs.

- One child pretends to serve and says, e.g. *I'm good at swimming.* Their partner pretends to hit the ball back and says, e.g. *I'm good at dancing.* The pairs continue taking turns to say sentences about what they're good at in the same way and make their rally as long as possible.
- At the end, children report back to their partner to check they can remember, e.g. *You're good at...* They can also tell the class, e.g. *Marco is good at.../ We're both good at...*

Pillar two: model creativity yourself

An essential rule-of-thumb for developing any skill or quality in others is to model it yourself. For example, if you want children to be polite and show respect, then you need to be polite and show them respect too. By the same token, in order to encourage children to see things in new ways, explore ideas and come up with original outcomes, it also helps if you model creative processes in the way you teach. These can be reflected in many ways, for example, how you motivate and engage children, the kinds of tasks and activities you offer, how you cater for individual differences and diversity, and the way you manage and organise your class. It is often useful to think about how you can be creative in small ways in the routine aspects of teaching. Here are some ideas:

Lining up

This can typically waste time and be dull. So why not think of little challenges to make it more creative, e.g. lining up in alphabetical order of first names or surnames, either forwards or backwards, lining up in order of height or age or month of birthday. Once children have got the idea, they will almost certainly suggest other ideas as well.

Taking the register

This can be made more creative by relating it to vocabulary that children are learning. As you go through the register, children respond by naming e.g. an animal. Children need to listen to what others say, as no repetitions are allowed. By varying the order in which you call the names on the register, this allows you to make it easier for some children and more challenging for others. Alternatively, you can pre-assign an animal to each child in the register. When you call out the name of their animal, children respond by naming its baby, e.g. *Dog! Puppy!/Tiger!/Cub!* You can also do this with, e.g. names of countries and languages or capital cities, e.g. *France – French! or Paris!; Argentina – Spanish! or Buenos Aires!*

Learning routines

Learning routines make children feel secure as well as provide opportunities for personalisation and natural acquisition of language. You can vary learning routines appropriately with different ages and levels. For example, with younger children an enjoyable opening lesson routine is a rhythmic gym sequence in which you cumulatively add different actions. With older children an opening lesson routine such as 'News of the Day' gives different children in each lesson an opportunity to share their personal news with the class.

Classroom management

You may like to think about creative techniques to manage your classes effectively, for example, the signal you use to get attention, e.g. a tambourine, a bell, a special gesture, or counting down to zero from five. Other examples of creative ideas for managing behaviour include a yellow and red card system as in football, or a 'noisometer' based on traffic lights: red = *Too loud!*, orange = *Turn the volume down!*, green = *Our quiet voices!*

It is also useful to have 'up your sleeve' simple, creative ideas that need no materials or preparation and use these to change the mood or as a warmer, closing or revision activity. Two of my favourites are:

Spelling gym

This activity helps children associate the shape of lower-case letters in the alphabet with physical actions and is an active and enjoyable way to practise spelling. Children start with their hands on their shoulders. This represents the line on the page. For vowels or consonants like 'm' or 'n', children cross their hands to the other shoulder. For consonants with a stalk above the line, e.g. 'd', 't', or 'h', children raise their arms in the air. For consonants with a stalk below the line, e.g. 'j', 'p', or 'q', children stretch their arms down to the floor. Either you spell words children know in chorus, e.g. apple, and children do the actions for each letter or, once children are familiar with the activity, they take turns to spell and guess words in pairs or groups.

Red or blue

This activity allows for a personal response to familiar vocabulary. Children stand in the middle of the classroom. Say two words from the same category or lexical set, e.g. '*red... blue...*' and point to either side of the room. Children go to the side of the room of the colour they prefer. Children then talk to each other and explain the reasons, e.g. *I've got a blue bike./My favourite T-shirt is red.* Repeat with other vocabulary, e.g. *dog/cat, hot, cold/milk, fruit juice/sweet, salty/swimming, cycling/seaside, countryside.*

Pillar three: offer children choice

By offering them choice, children learn to take responsibility for their decisions. They also begin to develop autonomy and have control of their learning. This leads to a sense of 'ownership' and motivation to go the extra mile to produce creative work. Exercising choice also helps to make learning more personalised and memorable. You can offer children choice in a range of ways from micro-decisions, such as who to work with, to macro-decisions such as choosing topics to study. Offering choice can be a powerful tool in behaviour management too. Some examples for offering choice are as follows:

Friendship groupings

Although not always desirable, it is beneficial to allow children to choose the friends they work with at times, e.g. for projects (at the same time making sure that no child ever feels left out). By choosing whom to work with, children generally feel more motivated. They also have an emotional investment in making the collaboration work successfully.

Lesson menu

Write a list of, e.g. five activities to do in the lesson on the board. Ask children to choose, e.g. three of them and explain that they can do them in any order. By giving children choice, you will find that they usually work in a more motivated and attentive way than if you impose a lockstep progression through activities. Children also often voluntarily choose to do the most challenging activities.

Format freedom

Whenever possible, allow children to choose the format for their work. This encourages both creativity and effort. For example, for group projects, children can choose the format in which to present their work, e.g. a poster, a digital presentation or a video. Similarly, when giving a personal response to a story, it may be appropriate to ask children to choose whether to, e.g. write a letter to, or from, one of the characters, or a newspaper report, a dialogue, a poem or a story review. Children usually find having the choice energising, and put greater effort and creative thinking into their work as a result.

Behaviour choices

Offering choice helps children to take responsibility for their decisions and to regulate their own behaviour. For example, in the case of a child who is not settling down to work, instead of telling him or her off, you might say, e.g. *I see you haven't started the activity yet. What would you prefer to do? Would you like to do the activity now in our lesson? Or would you prefer to stay behind and do it at break time?* The

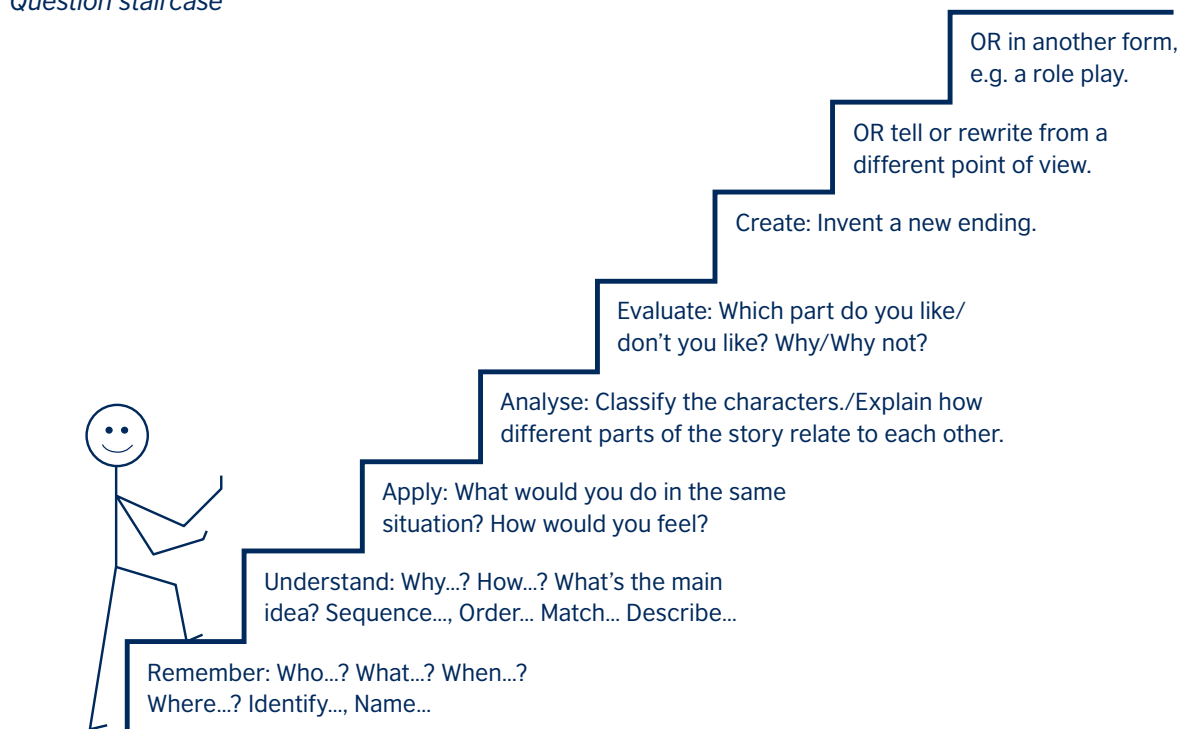
child will almost certainly choose to get the activity done in the lesson and comply with what you want. In this way, you avoid potential conflict and there is no loss of face for the child, as the outcome is a choice rather than an obligation that has been imposed.

Pillar four: use questions effectively

The way you use questions to engage children and lead them to think creatively is an essential skill. The stereotypical initiation-response-feedback (IRF) pattern of questions, e.g. T: *What colour is the car?* P: *It's red.* T: *Yes, very good,* is often prevalent in primary ELT lessons but has limited value. Although it can encourage participation, especially with younger children, if it's the only question type used, it can close down thinking. It is important to ask questions which interest children and open up, probe and extend their thinking. You also need to give children sufficient thinking time to answer questions and provide opportunities for them to construct and ask interesting and challenging questions themselves.

In order to differentiate, grade and sequence questions from easier to more challenging, it is helpful to use Bloom's revised taxonomy of thinking skills (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001). This is divided into lower order thinking skills (LOTS) identified as remembering, understanding and applying, and higher order thinking skills (HOTS), which are identified as analysing, evaluating and creating (*ibid.*). LOTS are essentially to do with recall, identification and basic comprehension. HOTS are more complex and demand greater cognitive effort. Developing LOTS is vital for foreign language learning especially in the early stages. However, if lessons never move beyond LOTS, this can lead to boredom and demotivation. Lessons that include HOTS make learning more engaging and memorable. They also develop thinking skills that are transferable across the curriculum and can lead to 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) and creative thinking. Below is an example of how you can use Bloom's revised taxonomy to plan questions and scaffold thinking skills based on a story.

Question staircase



Question dice

The ability to ask questions is an effective way of learning and also helps children think creatively. Question dice can be a useful and enjoyable activity to practise this. Children make dice out of paper or card and write a Wh-question word on each face: *What, Why, When, Where, How, Who*. Children work in pairs and take turns to roll the dice and ask their partner questions using the question word on the face where the dice lands. This activity is suitable to do e.g. after a story or topic-based work, or as a way to get children to talk about and share personal information.

Pillar five: make connections

Making connections and seeing relationships between things generates ideas and underpins creative thinking. It is helpful to encourage children to make connections between home and school as well as between subjects across the curriculum. Similarly, children can be encouraged to make connections between present and previous learning, between experiences inside and outside the classroom, and between ideas learned from different sources such as books and the internet. They can also make connections between English and their own language and culture, and between skills, which may be developed in one context or subject and transferred and used in another. The awareness of connections between different areas of their lives helps to build children's confidence and provides the foundations for them to become increasingly adventurous and creative in work they produce.

There are also specific activities that you can use to develop children's ability to make connections between ideas and objects and to think in divergent and creative ways. Some examples are:

Random association

This activity encourages children to make connections between things that don't have an obvious connection. Write words that children know on small pieces of card and put them in a bag or hat. Children take turns to take three cards at random and make a sentence or invent a story that connects them. You can also do the same activity using small objects, rather than word cards.

Odd one out

This activity typically has one right answer. In this version, children identify an odd one out according to any criteria they can think of. For example, if children have been learning about how fruit grows, the activity can be done using five flashcards,

e.g. peach, strawberry, melon, pineapple and grapes. Children take turns to identify an odd one out, e.g. *I think it's peach because peaches have a stone./I think it's strawberry because the seeds are on the outside.*

Comparative moments

Playing with the use of simile develops flexible thinking skills and often produces creative and amusing outcomes. Give children sentences to complete, e.g. *A lesson is like a sandwich because... / A school is like a funfair because...* Alternatively children choose words and create their own similes, e.g. *Homework is like a dessert when you aren't hungry.*

How many ways?

This activity develops flexible, inventive thinking and can be used to extend children's vocabulary in an enjoyable way. Choose an everyday object such as a paperclip, plastic cup, metal coat hanger, peg or ruler. Children work in pairs and brainstorm all the different things you can use the object for, e.g. *You can use a ruler as a sword.* If they don't know words in English, they use a dictionary to find them. They can also draw pictures to illustrate their ideas.

Pillar six: explore ideas

In order to foster an open, creative mind-set, you need to regularly provide frameworks and stimuli that encourage learners to explore, experiment and play with ideas. This needs to be in an atmosphere of mutual respect where divergent views are valued and judgement is withheld. Brainstorming techniques, problem-solving tasks and activities in which learners consider issues from different points of view all encourage exploration and lead to creative thinking. Some examples of these are:

Mind maps

Mind mapping, based on the work of Tony Buzan (2003), allows children to explore their thinking on a topic in a visually appealing way. Mind maps can be useful to build up ideas collaboratively with the whole class. Write the name of the topic in the centre of the board, e.g. *'Elephants'*, and three initial headings to guide the children's thinking, e.g. *appearance, where/how they live, why they are in danger*. Choose one heading at a time, listen to the children's ideas and add them to the map. Use different colour pens and add sub-headings as appropriate, e.g. *colour, size, African, Asian* etc. Children can then use the mind map to write a description of elephants or make their own mind map about another animal of their choice.

Wh-question web

Write the topic in a circle, e.g. *Rainforests/The water cycle*. Draw lines and write question words around the circle: *What? Why? When? How? Where? Who?* Children work in pairs and write questions they are interested in, beginning with each word. They then do research using suitable websites you have previously identified, and note and compare their questions and answers with the class. They use this as preparation for writing about the topic.

Five senses web

This is a variation of the above activity. Write the topic in a circle, e.g. *The playground*. Draw lines from the circle and write: *see, hear, smell, touch, taste*. Children note their ideas, either individually or collectively, and use the results to write a poem or description.

Imagine that...!

Use this activity to explore hypothetical possibilities and elicit creative ideas, e.g. *Imagine that... animals can talk/we don't need to sleep/children rule the world/we live on Mars. What happens?*

Creative observation

Use images to encourage creative thinking and an awareness of how images, particularly in advertising, influence our feelings. Ask, e.g. *What does the image make you think of? How does it make you feel? Why?* As a follow-up activity, children take digital photos designed to encourage a particular response, e.g. to make you feel hungry, or that a toy or game is fun. Children take turns to share their images and invite responses and compare if these are the same or different to the ones they intended.

Pillar seven: encourage critical reflection

Finally, as part of promoting creativity, we need to train children to evaluate and reflect critically on their own ideas, performance, actions and outcomes. As well as being an integral part of developing learner autonomy, it is only through critical reflection that children can assess the validity and value of their own creative work. This forms part of a reflective learning cycle and over time leads to the development of enhanced creative thinking. You can do this by reviewing learning outcomes against success criteria at the end of activity cycles and lessons, and through the regular use of learner diaries or self-assessment sheets. Two examples of other activities that encourage critical reflection are:

Reflective continuum

Give children a sheet with four to six areas for reflection and self-assessment on a continuum, e.g.

I didn't make an effort _____ I did my best.

I didn't use interesting words _____ I used interesting words

Children reflect on the work they have produced and mark where they think they are on the continuum for each area.

Self-assessment dictation

Ask children to make three columns in their notebooks and write 'yes', 'so-so' and 'no' at the top of each one. Use gesture to explain the meaning of 'so-so'. Dictate sentences, e.g. *I worked hard./I co-operated*. Children listen and write the sentences in the column they think applies to their work. They then compare and talk about the results. How many sentences in the 'so-so' column can they move to the 'yes' column next time?

Conclusion

This chapter outlines the benefits of developing creative thinking skills in primary ELT. It looks at general factors to bear in mind when laying the foundations of creativity in the classroom and the difference between big 'C' and little 'c' creativity (Craft, op. cit.). Although there are often barriers to developing creativity in primary ELT, such as a rigid syllabus, a dull coursebook, a lack of time, and the washback effect of external exams, developing children's creativity has many benefits for language learning and for developing broader educational objectives, attitudes and values. Whatever the age and level of children you work with, the seven pillars are designed to help you establish a classroom learning environment in which creativity flourishes, and to provide you with realistic and practical ideas for how to go about it.

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Carol Read has over 30 years' experience in ELT as a teacher, teacher educator, academic manager, materials writer and consultant. She has taught students of all ages and levels, from very young children to adults. Carol has published extensively in the field of teaching English to young learners, including coursebooks, supplementary materials, online storytelling and CLIL projects, as well as many articles on primary ELT. Carol's award-winning titles include *Bugs*, which won a British Council ELTon, and *500 Activities for the Primary Classroom*, which was Highly Commended in the ESU Duke of Edinburgh Awards. Carol's most recent publications are *Footprints* and *Tiger Time*. Carol is currently President of IATEFL.