### Creativity and Oral Narrative Proficiency in Persian Learners of English

Nematullah Shomoossi<sup>1</sup> (PhD), Ehsan Majidi Fard<sup>2</sup> (MA)

<sup>1</sup> Department of English, Sabzevar University of Medical Sciences, Sabzevar, Iran

<sup>2</sup> Department of English, Garmsar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Garmsar, Iran

nshomoossi@yahoo.com, nshomoossi@yahoo.com, e.majidi64@gmail.com

Abstract: Creativity is one of the most important characteristics in language users, which can manifest in both oral and written forms. This study attempts to investigate the relationship between creativity and oral narrative proficiency in Persian learners of English. To do so, 62 university students of English with homogenous language levels were randomly selected. They completed a self-rated creativity measure; the Arjmand Creativity Questionnaire was given to them; also, they were asked to perform two oral narrative tasks including storytelling *based on a series of pictures*, and storytelling *based on the first day experience at the university*. The results indicated a correlation coefficient of 0.63 between creativity and oral narrative proficiency, which indicated a relatively strong relationship between the two variables. Implications for teaching EFL are also discussed.

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### 1. Background

In recent decades, the communicative approach and task-based instruction have been researched from different perspectives. Larsen-Freeman (2000, p. 137) contends that students "use English to learn it" rather than "learn to use English" in task-based instruction: and teachers teach through communication rather than for it. Tasks that involve the use of imagination and creative ideas might provide high risk-taking learners with more chance to practice, that is, to produce more comprehensible output, which could lead to greater success in second language acquisition (Swain, 1985). This might be even more so in a foreign language environment, where output is mainly limited to the classroom settings. In an EFL context such as Iran, creativity has not gained the proper attention it deserves, and creative people do not find their proper place. Morris (2006) describes how *creativity education* has turned to be the core of some educational systems including primary schools and kindergartens (Scott et al., 2004) as well as in university instruction (Robbins and Kegle, 2010). In fact, education for creativity provides the situation for fostering latent talents predisposed in all human beings (Morris, 2006).

# 2. Creativity

The study of creativity as a cognitive factor in language teaching and learning has a long history in psychology (Cole et al., 1999). Sternberg (2006) describes how creativity was studied scientifically in many different areas after the innovative address of Guilford (1950). Especially in psychology, studies show that creativity is a latent capability in all human beings. However, some individuals may benefit the environment and education to manifest and utilize their potentials. Doubt appears when this term is interpreted as a rare phenomenon observable only in the exceptionally talented, in which case its relevance for the millions of average people learning a foreign language is obviously negligible (Cole et al., 1999).

If, however, creativity is hypothesized to be a special arrangement of those cognitive, motivational, social or personality characteristics present in everyone, its effects on second language acquisition cannot be disregarded. In other words, if creativity is considered as a domain-general talent capable of being fostered and utilized in different domains, it would be of paramount significance in language teaching and learning. Based on the idea of Root-Bernstein and Root-Bernstein (1999, 2004), the present study assumes that individuals can be creative in different domains, that creative abilities are rather domain-general, and that creative individuals share common intuitive and cognitive tools.

# 3. Approaches to Study Creativity

Approaches and theories entail a specific conceptualization of creativity and a specific understanding of the concept. In fact, approaches to creativity overlap a great deal, and they are almost mutually inclusive (Runco, 2004). Authors working within the psychodynamic (Freud, 1958), the humanistic (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Maslow, 1963) as well as the socio-psychological (Amabile, 1996) approaches have put forward theories in an attempt to account for this phenomenon.

Creativity can be described from different perspectives. First, the psychoanalytic perspective proposes that creativity originates in unconscious drives, its theoretical background lying in the work of Freud and in the tension between conscious and unconscious processes (Runco, 2004). Second, the behavioristic psychology developed in response to psychoanalytic subjectivism, with a positivistic premise; it postulates that only what is observable is appropriate for scientific psychological study (Brown, 2000). Third, the humanistic theory based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (Lutenist, 2002) offers that humans have six basic needs in different levels that must be met step by step in order for them to reach maximum potential and self actualization, without which, one cannot concentrate upon any creative activity. In the last level, people are free and comfortable enough to show their creative potentials. Fourth, the cognitive theories find creativity as a subset of an umbrella term named cognitive psychology; this approach deals with styles and consistent preferences of individuals to use their creativity. The cognitive key to creativity study is divergent thinking (introduced by Guilford, 1967), described as the capacity to generate multiple alternative solutions to a problem (Runco, 2004), while convergent thinking involves aiming for a single, correct solution to a problem. Divergent thinking is sometimes used as a synonym for creativity in psychology literature.

Comparing the four perspectives briefly described above, we find the latter (i.e. the cognitive approach which deals with divergent thinking) the most suitable approach for the present study; it describes divergent thinking as part of creativity which renders different creative solutions for an oral task (as in the present study, for instance).

# 4. Oral Narrative Tasks

Of the four key language skills, speaking seems to be the most important in learning a second or foreign language. Therefore, oral tasks preparing learners for effective communication have their own value in FLT. On the one hand, demands for speakers using English effectively are on the rise in EFL settings due to globalization and widespread use of English all over the world (Shomoossi and Ketabi, 2008). In Iran as an EFL context, it is almost extremely difficult for Persian learners to master the oral and auditory skills limited exposure because of to authentic communication. This is because the medium of instruction in the classroom is mostly Persian, and English teachers are mainly non-native speakers; this leads to the development of unnatural settings hampering an authentic interaction in the classroom. Since learners in general have few chances to interact with English native speakers, the exposure to authentic English is somewhat limited.

Narrative tasks are a well-established and frequently researched task type (Bygate, 1999; Robinson, 1995; Skehan & Foster, 199y). They usually involve the creation of a story in response to a certain stimulus: a picture strip or a short film. As in most cases, the stimuli given are purely visual and their verbal representations depend on the storyteller to a great extent; this task type seems ideal as far as the manifestation of creativity is concerned. In general, the oral narrative task is based on a story, where the participants intend to report it to the interviewer. Although the plot of the story is already determined by a series of pictures or a main topic, the creativity of language learner may play a significant role in adding details to the story.

# 5. The Present Study

The present study was a correlational investigation of the relationship between creativity and oral narrative proficiency of students of English in Iran. In other words, the study tended to investigate the creativity of Persian learners of English in their use of divergent thinking (as part of creative abilities) in making a certain version of a story presented as an oral narrative task. The study attempted to answer the following research question:

Q: Is there any significant relationship between creativity and oral narrative proficiency of Persian learners of English?

Accordingly, the following null hypothesis was formed:

H0. There is no significant relationship between creativity and oral narrative proficiency of Persian learners of English.

# Participants

The study data were collected from 62 students from three universities in Mashhad, Iran (including Ferdowsi University, Islamic Azad University and Khayyam Non-Profit University). First of all, 82 male and female sophomores majoring in both English Literature and TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) were chosen. A Comprehensive English Language Test (CELT) was given to the participants to evaluate the proficiency level of the subjects as well as to select a homogeneous sample. Of the 82 participants, only 68 were found to be homogenous; also, six participants could not take one or both of oral tasks, and were excluded from the study. Finally, 62 participants who took part in all phases of the research shaped the study sample (with both male and female cases of equal number and homogeneous age groups). Instrumentation

Three different instruments were used for collecting data from the participants. First, a modified version of Comprehensive English Language Test (CELT), consisting of 54 items, was given to the participants to assign them into homogeneous groups. The test had been piloted to 80 English major students at Islamic Azad University of Mashhad (Ziaee, 2010); this group was almost similar to the target group of the present study regarding their language level, gender and age. Having calculated the item facility (IF) and item discrimination (ID) indices, Ziaee (2010) discarded sixteen deficient items from the test; as a result, the number of items was reduced from 70 to 54. Then, the reliability of the proficiency test was computed utilizing the KR-21 formula (r=0.82) which indicated that the test was reliable (Ziaee, 2010). The test consisted of three sub-tests (a 22-item grammar section, a 15-item vocabulary section, and a 17-item reading comprehension section).

Second, a self-reported inventory (i.e. *Arjmand Creativity Test*, 2003), claimed to be the most reliable and valid test in Iran, was employed to measure the creative abilities of the participants. This self-reported measure, designed by Arjmand (2003) to assess the creativity of Iranian participants, consists of 75 items and five choices for each statement. The reliability of the *Arjmand Creativity Test* and its correlation with Abedi Questionnaire (1993) were already examined.

Third, two very similar versions of an oral narrative task involved both (1) inventing a story on the basis of pictures and (2) telling the story of their first day experience at the university. In designing the task, the comments of instructors who taught the participants were also taken into consideration. Participants performed the task in a very calm and friendly environment. The tasks were presented to the students by the second author. The task was to invent a short story based on the series of pictures and to report it to the interviewer after a one-minute planning time. The planning time was intended to give students an opportunity to plan the content of their narratives.

#### Procedure

At first, the modified version of the CELT was administered to the participants to ensure that there was no significant difference between them regarding their language levels. The time allotted to the test was 60 minutes. A total number of 82 male and female participants took the test. The mean, variance, and standard deviation of the CELT administered to 82 learners were calculated, and 14 outlier participants were excluded from the study. The cut-off point of homogeneity was one Standard Deviation below and above the mean of the CELT scores. Therefore, 68 participants remained to be the main participants. They were found to be homogenous in terms of their general language levels. However, 6 participants could not attend and take one or both of the oral narrative tasks, and were excluded from the study.

Also, Arjmand Creativity Questionnaire (2003) was administered to the participants. The participants were asked to provide information of their name, age and e-mail addresses on the papers in

order to be identified throughout stages of the study. They were also ensured that all tests and questionnaires of this study would have no influence on their university achievement exams, and that they were asked to be as honest as possible; they were reassured that their personal information would be kept confidential and used specifically for the present study, and not for others. The scores obtained in the creativity questionnaire ranged from 223 to 306.

The first oral narrative task consisted of a series of pictures. Participants received a sequence of pictures related to a story; they were given a oneminute preparation time to look through the pictures and create a reasonable story, and to talk for about two minutes to describe the story. The aim of the picture narrative was to elicit a speech sample sufficient for an overall evaluation. The participants were assessed on how well they sustained their performance in regard to pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and expressive content. Three weeks after the performance of the first task, participants were asked to tell a story about their *first* day experience at university, as the second task, either real or imaginary. They were given a oneminute preparation time to think and remember the details of the occasion.

Finally, two raters were asked to listen to the taped oral performances, and to rate them based on the scoring sheets. Raters were not permitted to confer with one another prior to or during the rating process. The mean of the two ratings was computed for each participant, and was considered as individual's *oral narrative proficiency* of the participants.

# 6. Results

The study involved 62 Persian learners of English in Mashhad, Iran; their age ranged from 20 to 26. After calculating the means and the standard deviations of the participants' scores in CELT, 14 outlier participants were excluded. In fact, the scores one SD below and above the mean were included, and the rest were excluded from the study.

An inter-rater reliability analysis was carried out to estimate the correlation between the scores given by the two raters on the oral narrative tasks. Therefore, using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation formula, the correlation coefficients were calculated.

Table 1 - The Inter-rater Reliability in Oral Narrative	e
Task 1	

Raters	Μ	SD	V	r
Rater 1	59.96	8.059	64.94	0.705
Rater 2	61.58	7.16	51.32	

Table 2 - The Inter-rater Reliability in Oral Narrative

Raters	Μ	SD	V	r
Rater 1	59.74	7.97	63.670	0.8085
Rater 2	62.22	6.94	48.243	

As observed in the study, the inter-rater reliability was highly acceptable: 0.70, for the first oral task and 0.80, for the second oral task (See Tables 1 and 2).

Table 3 - The Correlation Coefficient of the Two Oral Narrative Tasks

Tasks	Μ	SD	V	r
Task 1	60.68	6.76	45.70	0.7134
Task 2	64.40	4.99	24.91	

The same formula was utilized to compute the correlation of the two oral narrative tasks. The correlation coefficient between two oral narrative tasks was 0.71, which indicated a high degree of consistency between the two tasks (See Table 3). As for the main research question of the study, the correlation coefficient between creativity and oral narrative proficiency was calculated to be 0.63,

which is relatively high (see Table 4).

Table 4. The Correlation Coefficient of Creativity

and Oral Natrative Fronciency					
Variables	Μ	SD	V	r	
Creativity	268	21.4	459.6	0.63	
Oral Narrative Proficiency	64.7	4.7	22.09		

Therefore, it rejects the null hypothesis regarding creativity and oral narrative proficiency. In other words, there exists a relatively strong correlation between creativity and oral narrative proficiency of Persian Learners of English. The critical value for 62 participants, with probability less than 0.01, and in a directional decision was 0.2948; since the observed correlation, (r=0.63) is greater than the critical value, the correlation is considered to be significant (Brown & Rodgers, 2002).

#### 7. Discussion

The present study attempted to investigate the relationship between creativity and oral narrative proficiency through a self-rated creativity measure and two storytelling oral tasks. The results indicated a considerable relationship between the two variables (i.e. creativity and oral narrative proficiency of Persian learners of English). Generally, the findings

are in line with Albert and Kormos (2004) who also found a moderate correlation between measures of creativity and narrative task performance. However, the 10-15% common variance of the two variables in their study could have been attributed to a small sample size, and to the fact that only one single task was used (Albert & Kormos, 2004). It can be argued that the ability to produce original, novel ideas does moderately affect how students perform an oral narrative task.

In earlier Iranian studies on creativity, oral tasks were not taken into consideration; however, other issues in language learning were investigated to some extent. For instance, Naderi et al. (2009), focusing on university students and variables such as age and gender, used a multiple regression analysis and found that the interaction effects between creativity and those variables were low predictors of academic achievement. Faryadres and Gholamali (2009) did not find any significant relationship for predicting creativity by meta-cognitive strategies in learning a foreign language. However, in a high school setting, a significant and positive correlation was found between emotional intelligence and creativity of female high school students (Dadvar et al., 2012).

### 8. Conclusions and Implications

Based on the results, a considerable relationship was observed to exist between creativity and oral narrative proficiency in Persian learners of English. Since creative learners show a reasonable success in performing oral narrative tasks than other learners, this might bear implications for teaching foreign languages. Oral narrative tasks can display the oral proficiency of learners; therefore, it can be concluded that fostering creativity may result in increasing learners' speaking ability. On the other hand, knowing the creative ability of a learner may provide better knowledge for the interviewer to handle the interview and evaluate it.

Some pedagogical implications can be conceived to be drawn from the present research. First, creative people are intrinsically motivated to complete a learning task. Thus, educators must be aware that triggering the intrinsic motivation of such people can help start and complete a task. Also, if they implement an extrinsic reward structure with creative students, this might undermine their motivation. Second, creative potentials may be affected negatively in a formal assessment (e.g. in traditional final exams). Some people have gone far to say that educational systems can be called creativity killers, since they appear as barriers against creative behaviors. Such systems do not accommodate creative teachers and learners. Third, policy makers can help change the educational

systems, and focus more on the "teaching of creativity and successful risk-taking", particularly in EFL contexts. Finally, other studies with larger samples, various age and gender distributions, from other educational levels can also help complete the results of the present study.

**Corresponding author**: Dr. Nematullah Shomoossi, Department of English, Sabzevar University of Medical Sciences, Sabzevar, Iran. (E-mail: <u>nshomoossi@yahoo.com</u>)

**Nematullah Shomoossi,** PhD in Applied Linguistics, is the coordinator of English programs at Sabzevar University of Medical Sciences, Iran. He is involved in teaching English as well as research in language policy, learner strategies and distance education. E-mail: <u>nshomoossi@yahoo.com</u>

**Ehsan Majidi Fard** is an English instructor at the ILI and Jihad Language School, Mashhad, Iran. He is interested in psycholinguistics, e-learning and ESP. E-mail: <u>e.majidi64@gmail.com</u>

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