"I Suppose I Am Now a More Creative Teacher": An EFL Teacher's Journey into Creativity within Constraints*

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Abstract

Considering the paucity of self-studies exploring English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' journeys into becoming a creative teacher, in this qualitative action research, a mainstream Iranian teacher-researcher narrates the changes and challenges she observed while planning her creative classroom practices, implementing, and reflecting on them. While she experienced changes like going beyond the textbook, becoming a caring observer, and becoming a moment catcher, she faced constraining challenges like overcoming inner fears, showing (non)-compliance with institutional rules, and coping with situations when things did not turn out as expected. Such an insider view of teacher creativity reiterates that creativity needs to be considered not just as a set of techniques and procedures to be mastered but as an ongoing passion for renovation which should be cultivated over time despite existing constraints.

1. Introduction

As long as I remember, my life as an Iranian female English teacher has been wrapped with English. My old memories take me to English language classes at state schools where teachers were in a rush to cover the textbooks and make us sufficiently prepared for passing the exams. It now seems to me that in this top-down system of education teachers were neither encouraged nor expected to act *creatively* and to grow personally and professionally. Years later, when I myself became an English teacher, I could vividly see how "teacher-proof", "standardized", and test-driven curricula (Eryaman & Riedler, 2010; Noddings, 2013) disparaged teacher creativity. Under such circumstances in which conformity to the established rules was required, there was no surprise that most language teachers including me depended on the prescribed guidelines to teach the assigned textbooks page by page following a "cookbook fashion" (Tomlinson, 2015). Feeling frustrated with the existing conditions, I entertained thoughts of going beyond the current status by "acting creatively" within the "constraints" (Rosso, 2014); a riding concern which eventually kindled the generation of the present self-study by me, one of the article's authors.

Turning back to the literature, one can see that creativity, with all its ambiguities, has been a heated debate in language teaching since the 1990s (Anderson, 2002; Fasko, 2000-2001; Sawyer, 2004; Torrance, 1995). Laconically defined, creativity is seen as a novel solution to a perplexing situation (Amabile, 1996; Woodward, 2015). Extending the concept, some scholars maintain that creativity should entail not only novelty and originality, but also practicality and effectiveness (Maley & Peachey, 2015). Gibson (2005) adds "ethicality" to novelty, effectiveness, and practicality. In practice also wide spectra of research strands including language learner creativity, creative thinking, creative language production, creativity in materials development and curriculum design, technology and creative pedagogy, just to mention a few, have been progressing.

One branch of studies gaining momentum in recent decades is language teacher creativity (Anderson, 2002; Schoff, 2016; Wright, 2015), defined as a trait in teachers who are "involved in discovery, pushing the limits, taking a step into the unknown" (Torrance, 1995, p. 107). With this surge of interest, several publications have focused on fostering language teacher creativity by offering creative teaching tips and strategies (e.g., Maley & Peachey, 2015); exploring the qualities creative teachers should possess (e.g., Coffey & Leung, 2016); the ways by which teachers apply creativity in their teaching, and the ways by which creativity can be supported in institutional contexts (e.g., Ollerhead & Burns, 2016). In a similar vein, a good number of quantitative studies have been conducted studying the relationship between language teacher creativity and other variables (e.g., Aldujayn & Alsubhi, 2020; Pishghadam, et al., 2012; Ghanizadeh & Jahedizadeh, 2016); though as appraised by Maley and Kiss (2018), some of these studies suffer from methodological flaws and lapses. They argue that another defect in these correlational studies is that they "try to understand one specific, isolated aspect of EFL teachers' practice in relation to creativity", whereas "creativity should be looked at as a dynamic concept and studied in its context as a whole—involving learners, contextual factors and so on" (Maley & Kiss, 2018, p. 291-2).

Nonetheless, despite a fairly large literature on creativity in general and language teacher creativity to a lesser extent (Philip, 2013; Lilly & Bramwell-Rejskind, 2004; Nelson, 2016; Schoff, 2016; Woodward, 2015; Xerri, 2013), English language teachers' *narratives* of fostering their creativy including the challenges they go through in cultivating their creativity, the social and personal lived experiences, values, and assumptions which form their practices, and the constraints they face are comparatively scarce. As argued by Lilly and Bramwell-Rejskind (2004), "unfortunately, research studying everyday creativity in teachers is sparse" notwithstanding the possibility that "teachers' lives…can offer valuable insight into the process of creative teaching" (p. 4). Concerning the Iranian context of English language education, such a gap seems to be evidently palpable. While multiple empirical,

chiefly correlational, studies have been conducted on language teacher creativity (e.g., Baghaei & Riasati, 2013; Hemati & Raeesi, 2015), none, actually, purports to shed light on the challenges and changes language teachers go through upon practicing to be creative.

To address the existing research gap in English language teacher narratives of (un)becoming creative, I, working under the supervision of two Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) advisors, set off a journey of self-study to explore the ways by which I could practice creativity within constraints in a pedagogical setting via conducting a year-long action research. Such an insider view of teacher creativity shaped by a language teacher's pragmatic approach to classroom teaching may "blur the boundaries between theory and practice by providing rich insider accounts of the complex day-to-day work of educational practice as well as how practitioners theorize and understand their work from the inside" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. X). The following research question guided the study:

What changes and challenges are experienced by a language teacher practicing creativity in an institutional language context?

2. Literature Review

Despite the growing research interest in creativity in various disciplines, scholars have long found it difficult to set an exact definition for it (Baker, et al., 2001; Marksberry, 1963). On a broad spectrum, creativity is seen as a novel solution to a perplexing situation (Amabile, 1996; Woodward, 2015; Zhou & George, 2001, 2003). Extending the concept, some scholars maintain that creativity should entail not only novelty and originality, but also practicality and effectiveness (Maley & Peachey, 2015). Adding more to the list, Plucker, et al., (2004) see 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" (p. 90). Sawyer (2006) provides a more general definition of creativity as "the emergence of something novel and appropriate, from a person, group, or a society" (p. 34). Gibson (2005) adds "ethicality" to novelty, effectiveness, and practicality. Distinctions

have also been made between "little c" creativity and "big C" Creativity, "everyday" creativity and "sublime" creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997); and product creativity and process creativity (Boden, 2004), to mention some. Such a multitude of perspectives is rooted in a wide assortment of theories of creativity; amongst the most-cited ones are behaviorist, humanist, developmental, and system theories (Maley & Kiss, 2018; Starko, 2005).

Although creativity has traditionally been of interest to art-related disciplines, it is gaining importance in nearly all disciplines, among which is Applied Linguistics. As evinced by Maley and Kiss (2018, p.69), "until fairly recently, relatively little attention seems to have been given to the role of creativity within AL". This has progressively paved the way for the emergence of theoretical and practical perspectives as well as research studies which cover a wide spectrum including language learner creativity, creative thinking, creative language production, creative pedagogy, creativity in curriculum design, just to mention a few.

One recent thread of studies running through the discussions is language teacher creativity (Anderson, 2002; Read, 2015; Renzulli, 1992; Schoff, 2106; Torrance, 1995; Wright, 2015). With this surge of interest, several publications have exclusively focused on fostering language teacher creativity by offering creative tips, techniques or strategies (Maley & Peachey, 2015). For instance, Woodward (2015), besides listing some practical principles, suggests a *creativity cycle* for language teachers containing practice, reflection and relaxation phases. Looking more holistically, Philip (2013) states that even if this framework is acted upon, teacher creativity does not occur in isolation, but in collaboration and interaction with their fellow colleagues, their students, their institute managers and other experts.

Focusing on product-based creativity, a good number of quantitative and correlational studies have been conducted studying the relationship between language teacher creativity and other variables like the relationship between teachers' creativity and their success in classrooms from the viewpoint of EFL learners (Pishghadam, et al.,

2012); the relationship between EFL teachers' degree of creativity and language learners' academic achievement (Baghaei & Riasati, 2013); the relationship among EFL teachers' creativity, teaching style and burnout (Ghanizadeh & Jahedizadeh, 2016); English teachers' perceptions of creativity (Aldujayn & Alsubhi, 2020; Cropley, et al., 2019;), and the effect of certain professional trainings on teachers' creativity (Arifani, et al., 2019). On the other hand, the majority of qualitative studies also chiefly focus on exploring teachers' perception or conceptualization of creativity through interviews or class observations and portraying characteristics of creative teachers (Akyildiz & Çelik, 2020; Ollerhead & Burns, 2016; Richards & Cotterall, 2016; Richards, 2013). In a more recent study, Brereton and Kita (2020) report on their own duoethnographic dialogues in which they exchanged their perceptions of creativity. As reported, the sessions aided them to reach "a greater insight of what creativity means to them, why principled creativity matters in teaching, and how to further develop as creative practitioners" (p. 7).

Notwithstanding the existence of various studies on creativity as a product, only a few studies related to creativity process and the challenges the teachers go through have been reported (Schoff, 2016; Malsbary, 2015; Lilly & Bramwell-Rejskind, 2004). Amongst them, Lilly and Bramwell-Rejskind (2004) conducted a qualitative case study to draw a "portrait" of an experienced creative teacher and her teaching process through conducting various interviews with her and her students as well as observing her classes. Three overlapping subthemes of *preparation, connection,* and *reflective teaching* were deduced from the data describing the overall process of her creative teaching. In another study, Schoff (2016), an English instructor working with Asian and Chinese students, narrated her own process of designing and implementing a creative grammar lesson through four stages of *preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification*. In the *preparation* stage, she reviewed the creativity literature and realized that there was no pre-exiting fun and meaningful game available for teaching grammar to students. Her challenge was to create one. During

the *incubation* stage, she kept mulling over and playing with ideas loosely. Her *illumination* stage happened as a brilliant idea crossed her mind unexpectedly. In the last stage, *verification*, she implemented her new game in the class which culminated in the students' true engagement and gave them "the opportunity to be creative, to play with words, while practicing using the correct grammar" (p.50).

Given the scarcity of explorations on language teacher narratives of (un)becoming creative, in this self-study I attempt to narrate the changes and challenges I experienced over a period of one year as I attempted to bring more creativity to my teaching.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design

With a strong desire for cultivating my own sense of creativity within the institutional constraints, I engaged in a qualitative action research for four consecutive semesters (each consisting of 16 one hour and a half sessions, during 2017-2018). The cyclical process of planning teaching practices (as novel and effective as I could and according to the objectives of each unit of the textbook assigned by the language institute I was working for); implementing them; observing and documenting the events, and eventually critically reflecting on them (Burns, 2010) provided me with spaces to self-study myself and keep records of the challenges and changes I went through. Furthermore, on regular intervals, I presented my field notes, the prepared materials and class activities, the audio transcripts of the classes, and the students' documents to my TEFL advisors, the two other authors of the study, who offered me suggestions for further creative actions, aided me in interpreting the changes and challenges I was going through and how they could be verbalized theoretically.

3.2. Site and Participants

I executed my action research in a renowned private English language institute in Tehran. Similar to many other language institutes in Iran, this multi-branched center has established a reputation for recruiting teachers in a "standardized" and somehow strict system. The prospective teachers are required to go through various stages like

grading an institute-administered exam, attending a Teacher Training Course (TTC), observing classes held by other teachers in the institute, and eventually demonstrating teaching skill before the supervisors. Furthermore, regular teacher observations are conducted by the institute's supervisors and annual TTCs are held for teachers from all branches to ensure conformity among them. In addition, all teachers are required to merely use the teaching materials determined by the institute for different levels. It was the place where I endeavored to put into practice the idea of creativity within constraints.

I conducted the study with a community of seven Iranian females at elementary to intermediate level of English proficiency for almost one year. Since the institute's classes were not classified based on the students' age, the participants ranged from 15 to 65 in age and were hence different on so many aspects including life experiences, socio-cultural backgrounds, marital statuses, personality traits, and learning style. Such individual differences made a direct impact on my decisions and actions as I was required to constantly ponder on novel practices that could possibly appeal to various individuals in the class.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this self-study was collected through various sources including observing, audio recording and transcribing over fifty sessions of the class; recording field notes in which I wrote down all my impromptu ideas, decisions, rationalizations, actions, qualms, the students' reactions, etc.; and conducting a focus group interview with the students in order to obtain insights into their perceptions and reactions about me and the class events, even the criticisms they had (with permissions granted). Data analysis started with reading the evolving bulk of data, coding the incidents, writing marginal memos, cross checking the data, and frequently checking them with my two TEFL advisors (Flick, 2014). Focusing on the two themes of "changes" and "challenges", we placed the pertinent (sub)-categories and incidents under each of the themes, and rephrased the headings several times so that they would fit the events. A number of these (sub)-categories are briefly explained below.

4. Results

4.1. Changes

In the past, though not long ago, I used to just read the teacher's guide and go to class following the instructions provided step by step without bothering myself searching more about the topics or thinking about how they could be dealt with differently. However, a strong desire for being a creative teacher turned me into a hardworking teacher as I started leaving my comfort zone and saturating myself with as much information as I could via reading widely on a variety of topics, watching inspirational videos on creativity and pondering over the ways I could relate and apply them to my teaching. This practice aided me to gradually develop a network or "treasury" of ideas (Noddings, 2013) and to see how they could be borrowed, refined and given a new twist. It was then creative ideas started popping into my mind slowly. As rightly put by Schoff, generating new ideas "is a nonlinear cycle of steps that may meander along for hours or days as we plod through information and attempt to invent solutions or come up with new ideas" (2016, p. 42). Meanwhile, I kept critically reflecting on my conventional practices and the ways by which they could be replaced with alternative ones. This serious year-long attempt for beating "addiction to mindless routines" (Maley & Kiss, 2018, p. 28) and putting into practice novel ideas gradually made me witness some *changes* both in my personal and professional life; changes like going beyond the designated textbook, becoming a more caring and reflective observer, becoming more cognizant of teaching moments which occurred in the class, capitalizing on the students' potentials as content co-creators, and using a variety of media and redesigned games tactfully. Three of these changes are briefly explained below, given space limitations.

4.1.1. Going beyond the textbook

Going beyond the designated textbook and bringing my "personal touch" to the class (Tomlinson, 2013) was one of the major changes which occurred to me in my process of practicing to be a creative

teacher. This was done chiefly through adopting, adapting, re-designing materials and activities as well as creating those of my own. At the beginning of the process, specifically in the first semester, it took me ages to find pertinent topics related to the lessons and develop extra activities for the class—not mentioning the times when I desperately felt idealess or when no brilliant idea crossed my mind. This practice of selecting and preparing materials appeared to be quite demanding since as suggested by Maley and Kiss (2018) "materials in themselves do not guarantee creativity: even the most creative materials can turn to dust in the hands of an uninspiring teacher" (pp.125-6). For preparing creative lesson plans and activities, the most important factors I took into consideration were novelty and effectiveness which had to be looked at not only from my perspective but also that of the students. So, I believed that if the activity could be something that the students had rarely, if ever, experienced, that is novelty; the first cornerstone of creativity. Moreover, I had to create class activities which could be both entertaining and purposeful (Ellis, 2016; Nelson, 2016; Schoff, 2016). Giving the foreign food home flavor, storying the self, and bringing real-life-ness to the class were among these beyond-the-textbook activities; two of which are briefly narrated below.

4.1.1.1. Giving the foreign food home flavor
The textbook I taught, not unlike other commercial textbooks published by international publishers in English-speaking countries, was replete with contents related to target language countries' culture or behavior norms. Though considering them informative, the students often expressed that they felt alienated from the topics as they did not have much to share. A tackling strategy I started to deploy was to give the foreign food home flavor by bringing texts which imparted information about Iranian culture and heritage in English (Author, 2020; Shawer, 2010). I rationalized that by doing so the students could be provided with opportunities to learn the new cultural contents alongside their own Iranian culture.

As an example, in one occasion, one of our lessons was about table manners in different countries, particularly America. To experience the

topic in a more realistic and practical way, I searched the net for Iranian table manners and came up with two texts; one written by an anonymous foreign tourist who described the typical Iranian table manners and foods like khoresht (stew) or chelo (rice) and their approximate equivalents in English; the second one was a piece of article in *Guardian* newspaper which was about the words in different languages that do not have equivalents in English including the Persian word "taa'rof", explained as "an art of etiquette ubiquitous in everyday Iranian life." Having read the texts, we, even those who were often reluctant to speak, talked about Iranian table manners and shared our hilarious memories of getting stuck in taa'rof situations and how sincere or insincere we were. Incidents like this in which English was practiced in familiar contexts may "akin to serving local and customized food through foreign plates. When a difficult-to-swallow pill is coated with sugar, then the job is made easy" (Elangovan, 2009, p.1).

4.1.1.2. Storying the self

Bringing episodes of my own life to the class, as a type of class content, was another event. For instance, once one of the textbook's units was about life plans. It started with an inventory which asked students to check the options they preferred to follow in life like "writing songs" or "teaching adults how to read". Feeling unsatisfied with the textbook's information, I decided to share a reflective writing about my own life journey which contained the challenges I faced as a result of choosing a wrong university major at the age of 18, my subsequent failure in finding a satisfying job; and my eventual decision for choosing English teaching as a profession I had long yearned. Sharing such a confession-like self-reflection with the class was not easy. I knew that by disclosing myself I was admitting that I had made many mistakes in life, but I thought that if it could alert my students about how life-determining their choices could be, it would worth it.

Beyond my expectations, my frankly-written life-story reached the students' heart and I could see them talking about their past dreams, fiascos, and future plans. Mahdie, a mother of two children, said with sorrow: "I had very wishes for life but I didn't get to them. I would like

to teach in university. I studied in high school and I got married. She then added, "my husband wasn't satisfied with me continuing my education. So all of the wishes are just in mind. I still cry on the first of autumn because I really liked school." Looking impressed, the class started encouraging her by mentioning examples of individuals who had attended university at old ages, and how she could reach her dream of going to "university" and "being in the society" if she put her mind on that. It seemed that the candid tone of my writing had acted contagiously and enthused some of the students to get angsts off their chest. In other words, "storying the self" made the class consider the life plans topic, dealt with shallowly in the textbook, with more enthusiasm and affinity. It was also an example of sharing content which is "not subjected to formal testing. It is a free gift that some students will use creatively to further their own learning" (Noddings, 2013, p. 213).

In the interview session I learnt that such self-stories had an impact on the students. Elaheh pinpointed that "when you talk about different things, into your story you teach the book." Similarly, Fatemeh mentioned, "we had a teacher, when she came to the class, she opened the book and would study from the start up to the end… . No conversations, nothing…but you said about your experience, your life and it was very good." It was also fascinating to me when I understood that they had noticed my efforts in influencing them, as Mehrsa said "you understood in which ways we understand better and you used those ways."

4.1.2. Becoming a caring observer

Prior to this journey, teaching meant to me as teaching the designated pages and leaving the class without much genuine interaction with the students. I did not even bother myself to ask why one particular student looked cheery or doleful one session, as I assumed the hierarchy of the teacher and students would be infringed if I acted leniently or sympathetically. With that mindset, whenever my students forgot to do their homework, I immediately gave them a negative point disregarding

the reason or the possibility that it had only occurred once. However, as I made up my mind to open spaces for teaching creatively, this strongly-rooted belief that 'I have a particular position and prestige because I am a teacher' started to wobble. I gradually learnt that I needed to be a sharper observer of my students' feelings and emotions in the class (Noddings, 2013), because there might be a reason for their silence, passivity, or obliviousness.

An example of this "caring-about" (Noddings & Brooks, 2017) happened when the students were supposed to do a certain task at home so that we could check it in the class. Roya, a high school student who was preparing herself for the university entrance exam and constantly looked anxious in the class, had forgotten to do the job. I hardly stopped myself from making a fuss about her negligence by penalizing her. At the end of the class when everyone was gone, I confronted her gently and asked her for the reason. She told me fretfully that she had many exams at school and she did not have any time to do the assignment. The *old me* would not have even asked for the reason, but the *new me* tried to give her the trust that she could make it up. With shadows of apprehension fading her countenance, she left the class with a smile on her lips.

After that session, one day I received a phone call from Roya's mother. She had called to thank me for the talk I had with her. Apparently, Roya had been suffering from a great amount of angst and had spent some days at the hospital. When I heard about this, I felt really sorry for her, but also good, because I was able to see her anxiety and could lift some pressure from her shoulders. Events like this enabled me to realize that if I wanted to practice creativity, I had to initially practice reaching out to my students and their inner worlds.

This emotional change had been noticed by the students as during the interview, they kindly described me as a teacher with "enthusiasm" who loves her job and transfers this love and enthusiasm to her students. Other students also used adjectives like "patient", "sympathetic", "like a friend" or a "family member rather than a teacher" to describe their feelings towards me. They all believed that I had gone through some

changes during the four semesters we had been together. Fatemeh, for example, stated that "when I saw you at first, I said …oh my God I must change my institute. She is very serious but you became kinder as you became familiar with us".

4.1.3. Becoming a moment catcher
In tandem with practicing to be a caring observer, I learnt that teaching cannot simply happen in a pre-determined and pre-planned fashion, but I had to be on the lookout for capturing the "teaching moments" which happened extemporaneously. One of these captured moments occurred as we were working on 'I Have a Dream' speech by Martin Luther King. The reason for choosing this speech as a class activity was threefold. Firstly, there was a mention of Martin Luther King in our textbook and when I asked the class about him, only Tahereh, a former librarian, had recognized him. Secondly, they could experience a profounder understanding of what intonation is by listening to his style of delivering speech; and thirdly, we could work on some new vocabularies.

To fulfill the aims, I extracted a page of his speech which thematically centered on the need for equality between the Black and White, with the refrain "I have a dream that…" preluding each part. I invited the class to pay due attention to the way he was articulating the words and then repeat the sentences. As the students were taking turns emulating his intonation, I was struck by a thought that we could also talk about our dreams for our own country. So, despite having time limitations, I took the liberty in suggesting the topic. After a couple of minutes, Adrina, the youngest student in the class, said "I have a dream that one day no poor people is here". Her classmates nodded along in agreement and started producing sentences staring with "I have a dream that…". Tahereh who was heeding to her classmates said: "But teacher, I have a bigger dream. I was in war and I know how war destroy life. I dream that nobody experience war at all". Joining the discussion, Roya also explained that her uncle had been martyred in the Iraq-Iran war of the 1980s and even after years her mother mournfully grieved for his

loss. Candidly realizing how unbearable losing a beloved one is, we all shared our words of empathy with her.

Luther King's speech, which I had initially selected for some pronunciation and vocabulary practices, led to a discussion in which we extemporaneously voiced our patriotic dreams. Reflectively speaking, the event taught me that being the teacher is not just about teaching the designated materials; it is getting to know the students and their way of thinking; it is being present for students so that they can be heard; and it is becoming a "moment catcher", as I called it.

4.2.   Challenges

My expedition into being a creative teacher was not always promising. Throughout the process, I faced numerous covert and overt challenges, some of which are touched upon below.

4.2.1. Overcoming inner constraints

Frankly speaking, throughout the journey, I kept struggling with various fears; inner fears that existed within me and outer fears which were chiefly due to the restrictions set by the institute or in some cases the students. The inner fears were mostly due to the doubts I had about my capabilities which at times prohibited me to go beyond the requirements of the book and he institute and to act differently. At another level, leaving my comfort zone and endeavoring to come up with ideas which may not be equally good or favorable enough as the ones in the textbook was another inner constraint I had to beat. In other words, ready-made materials, ancillary stuff conventionally coming with them, and the teacher's guides made me so reliant and needful that I found it daunting to shake off myself or bother myself to come up with my own ideas. It was tempting to get all cozy in my comfort zone, close my eyes, and pretend that everything is as it should be. A feeling inside me reminded that I was neither paid for nor appreciated by the institute for such extra drudgeries. It actually took me some time to persuade myself that if I ignore innovation, my students and even I would be losing a lot.

4.2.2. Showing (non)-compliance with institutional rules

Besides inner constraints, there were overt fears which intimated me from getting off the beaten track; fears of not fully covering the assigned syllabi and making students ready for their exams; fears of being caught up by the supervisor in the midst of a rule-violating teaching and consequently being chastised for not observing the standards or transgressing them; and needless to mention, fears of being given the sack! Like inner fears, it took me a while to challenge such institutional routines or to partially become oblivious of some. I kept pondering on how I can overcome the fear of being judged and shift my attention to my students' learning rather than my supervisor's negative comments. I gradually figured out that the system of evaluation was not fair to the teachers since fifteen minutes of class observation is like a drop of water against an ocean. Progressively, as I tried to instill this way of thinking in my mind, I came to realize that when I was being observed in the class, I was not fearing my supervisor's presences that much; my voice was no longer shaking and I was no longer feeling threatened by her comments. Surprisingly, as I was building up my confidence, I was no longer receiving negative comments from the supervisor, partly because the institute could see the students' exam scores were improving or they expressed their willingness to have classes with me again; which meant a lot to the managerial board.

I never showed complete non-compliance to the institutional rules and I never tried to be a rebellious rule breaker; however, while following the guidelines, I tried to seek *compromises* or bend the rules for the sake of more worthwhile learning goals. An incident of compromising happened when my class was observed by the supervisor during a movie session. Teachers on this session have to work on a sit-com that comes with the textbook series package. These sit-coms were not often welcomed by the students as they found them rather boring and far from reality. Having bent the rule, we decided to watch an episode of *Black Mirror*, a British television anthology series about technology, which was closely relevant to one the textbook's lessons. Since it had taken me hours to create a worksheet for certain episodes of the movie and I was seeing students conversing vehemently about

the effects of modern applications on people's lives, I did not try to stop the activity in its tracks when the supervisor arrived. After the class, the supervisor told me that to avoid disorder in the institute all the students had to watch the sit-coms. I asked her what if the students watched both movies. She kept silent for a moment and started reciting the rules for me once more. I took her silence as a sign of acceptance and decided to use both movies. To me, in this way neither the rules had been violated nor had I to stop implementing my own plans in the class. Nonetheless, the story did not finish here. While I managed to seek the supervisor's consent, another constraint stopped me to move further, lack of time. I was behind the syllabus and had to move back to the textbook!

4.2.3. Experiencing occasions when things don't turn out the way you want!

During the process, I learnt that confronting the constraints demanded me to take risks. Not disregarding the risks which produced promising results, there were times when risks did not yield benefits or things did not turn out the way I had planned. For instance, once I intended to work on a TED Talk video in which a lecturer talked about social media "likes" and how they were affecting people's life. I expected it to create an opportunity for the students to talk more on the topic; however, my expectation was not met as they found the video too difficult to comprehend and asked me to bring simpler videos for them. Such failures or mistakes were part of the process from which I learnt to act more tactfully.

5. Discussion

Holding a personal concern about practicing creativity within constraints, I, a mainstream Iranian EFL teacher, engaged in an action research which required me to "generate" novel ideas or hypotheses and then "explore", evaluate, and implement them (Finke, et al., 1992). The iterative analysis of the collected data including my field notes, transcription of class sessions, and interviews with the students evidenced some changes and challenges experienced by me.

A glaring change was practicing to go beyond the designated textbook by adopting, adapting and more particularly creating potentially novel and effective materials and activities (Bao, 2018; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). These beyond-the-textbook materials served various purposes like reducing the foreign or bland taste of the textbook's contents by contents flavored with Iranian Islamic culture and real-life scenarios (Author, 2020). In other words, the textbook's constraints inspired me to take a leap forward and change my role from teacher as "curriculum-transmitter" to "curriculum developer" (Shawer, 2010). Expounding on the issue, Nelson (2016) suggests that the cultivation process in teachers happens when they are faced with transculturally perplexing moments in their classes because they can no longer resort to the teacher guide for help and have to think of a creative way to act skillfully.

Besides, the journey impacted me emotionally and morally as I turned to be a more caring observer through developing an awareness of my classroom dynamics, students' inner worlds, and their learning progress (Noddings, 2013). Far from complacency, I modestly exhibited this moral commitment (Noddings & Brooks, 2017; Schoff, 2016) in my classroom management by sensing what was going on with my students (an example of which was Roya who was suffering from anxiety); reconciling the barrier between me and the students by narrating my own life stories; and inviting them to share those of their owns, inter alia. The possible nexus between teacher creativity and morality certainly deserves further exploration.

The practice also made me realize that teaching should not necessarily take place in a linearly-planned manner as unforeseen classrooms events, if captured timely and tactfully, could equally be effective. Wright (2015) states that whatever lies in the environment of the class can inspire fresh, relevant, and efficient ideas in teachers. With this in mind, the language teacher is likely to convert from a teacher of the book to an "event maker"; events which students are enthusiastic to be part of. Concerning the ways by which creative teachers can tackle the unpredictable nature of the classroom experience, Underhill (2014)

suggests that teaching is like performing art, both happen spontaneously at the moment. He adds that:

The class should become a living interaction rather than the enactment of a prepared script. This spontaneous interaction is not represented in the plan, in the course book, in the material, nor is it featured in teacher training syllabuses. Improvisation largely escapes being observed, articulated critiqued or developed. (p. 59)

Nonetheless, as I was moving in the direction of becoming a creative teacher, I faced some challenges or constraints which both defeated and encouraged me. This concurs with Graves's (2016) idea as he believes that creativity is made possible through constraints since they shape a particular domain. In my case, besides the discouraging "inner critic" who cast "self-doubt" on me and made me feel afraid "of mistakes, of judgment and failure" (Maley & Kiss, 2018, p. 29), one of the biggest inner constraints I had to beat was leaving my comfort zone. According to Beghetto (2010), teachers mostly prefer to stay in their comfort zone and adopt "convergent teaching practice" because they think that unexpected or imaginative ideas are unsettling. For me, the situation got more unsettling when no matter how hard I tried brilliant ideas did not cross mind.

Showing non-compliance with rules while working in an institutional context, where unity among teachers was more appreciated than their creativity, was another main constraint I had to confront. As similarly put by Torrance (1995), for teachers who desire to be creative, it "may be difficult to hold to routine and [they] become restless under conventional restraint" (p. 14). For instance, I had to create ideas based on the contents of the prescribed textbook as I was not allowed to skip any part of it. While there were times that I saw myself surrendered obediently to the textbook, there were occasions when I managed to make compromises without breaking rules (like working on a movie series besides the sit-com prescribed by the institute). Such extra-curricular practices made me face another barrier which was time management. The results of other studies also indicate that time

pressure would negatively affect EFL teachers' creativity (e.g., Barjesteh, et al., 2018).

All these challenges made a more risk-taking teacher out of me. While there were times when risks were paid off, there were occasions when things did not turn out the way I had planned. As Robinson states, "in any creative process there are likely to be dead-ends: ideas and designs that do not work. There may be many failures and modifications and much refashioning of imaginative activity before the best outcomes, the best "fit" is produced" (1999, p. 33). Similarly, Anderson (2002) and Richards and Cotterall (2016) view self-confidence for risk taking as an indispensable component of teacher creativity. Likewise, Maley and Kiss (2018) consider creative teachers as the ones who are "open to a teaching mind-set that enables [them] to teach 'as an act of inquiry' rather than 'in the hope of being right' "(p.192).

From where I am standing now I can see that the journey for creativity with all its challenges, some of which are still unsettled, provided me with opportunities to partially develop characteristics possessed by effective teachers already described in the literature like ability to take risks; having positive attitudes; dedicating time to students; listening to and caring for students' personality; challenging the self and students and inspiring them, inter alia. All things considered, *I suppose I am now a more creative teacher*. I truly hope that the present journey would pave the way for continued enquiries by me and other interested language teachers.

6. Conclusion

The present study was an attempt to narrate the changes and challenges experienced by a mainstream Iranian EFL teacher as she practiced creativity teaching over a period of one year. While she experienced changes like breaking up with her old habits, becoming more observant of her surroundings, becoming a moment catcher, and becoming a materials/activity developer instead of relying on what she had been assigned to do, she faced constraining challenges like inner fears, her comfort zone, (non)-compliance with institutional rules, situations when things did not turn out as expected. It also reiterates that creativity

needs to be considered not just as a set of techniques and procedures which could be mastered but as an ongoing passion for renovation, change, and improvement which should be cultivated over time despite existing constraints.

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