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THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATIVITY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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ABSTRACT

During the past decades scientific research caused major changes in the perception of students' learning styles. Empirical findings show that learning styles are neither innate nor unchangeable. On the contrary, students themselves adapt their learning behaviour to the task at hand and aim at trying out different learning styles using their creativity. Therefore, teachers have to plan and propose activities that invite their students to recur to a number of learning strategies. The aim of this paper is to emphasize the importance of the students' creativity in foreign language acquisition.

KEYWORDS: creativity, foreign language, acquisition, improvisation

1. Introduction

Of Latin origin, the concept of *creativity* has many definitions, sometimes twisted and tautological ones. The simplest would be: *"creativity is the ability to create" and "to create means to produce original and useful ideas by combining elements that have already existed"* (Maguire, 2017). The defining element of creativity is therefore generating new ideas, while innovation also involves making changes based on them. The word "creativity" is relatively new, but interest in this topic has started in antiquity: Plato, Heraclitus, Aristotle, etc. The French mathematician Jacques Hadamard is the one who describes for the first time the four phases of the invention process: preparation, incubation, illumination, verification.

The term *creativity* was introduced by the American psychologist G.W. Allport in 1937 after understanding that the psychic substratum of creation is irreducible to skills and involves a general disposition of the personality to the new, a certain organization of psychic processes in the personality system and is used since then in published literature.

According to some researchers, the new term replaces and includes, based on a new scientific interpretation, the old terms of *innovative spirit*, *inventiveness* and *talent*. This phenomenon, *creativity*, has a

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special complexity, such as there is no consensus among specialists on the definition of this concept. Instead, there are a number of meanings of the concept of *creativity*, in the view of some authors, such as:

- G. Allport – the set of human qualities that lead to generating new ideas, to originality;
- Al. Roşca – complex of mental qualities, which, in favorable conditions, generates new and valuable products in society;
- J. Moreno – the capacity of introducing something new into the world;
- M. Roco – hypercomplex formation of personality and group generating values, etc.

2. Some Fundamental Aspects Regarding Creativity in Foreign Language Acquisition

Taking into account that this phenomenon – creativity – involves the specific interaction between cognitive and no cognitive factors of the psyche, we can easily realize that intelligence, thinking, imagination and memory, as cognitive factors, take a special role in the development of creativity. An average level of intelligence, special skills (musical, technical, pedagogical, mathematical, sports, etc.) can facilitate the development of creative activity in one field or another. Divergent thinking produces unique solutions to solve a certain problem (J.P. Guilford), and imagination involves the development of new images and projects, all these processes being subordinated to memory, which provides the person with information stored in its structures.

We might think that these intellectual capacities mentioned above are sufficient for the creative act. This is not the case, because the initiation, direction, support and completion of the creative activity means the existence of non-cognitive factors such as motivation, favorable attitude towards creation or a series of character traits of the person involved in the act of creation.

To exemplify this information we can take the following into consideration: a writing task in a foreign language involves:

- motivation from the students; if the subject does not interest them, they will have a negative attitude, therefore they will not use the reserves of their creative power:
- the subject under discussion must be accessible to the students and the teacher must carefully prepare the activity and coordinate it so as to "awaken" the students' imagination;
- in order to be able to write, everyone must have something to say, so students will use the previously acquired knowledge, stored in their memory. At the same time, through repeated exercises, they were used to observing various things, the activity prior to a writing exercise imprinted on students the habit of using their imagination in a completely personal way, using data, information provided to all in a personal way.

It will be much easier for talented students with writing style to imagine, to create something, provided they have a sufficiently rich vocabulary. A rich vocabulary is the result of reading, of text study – mandatory for those studying a foreign language. Having a rich knowledge of vocabulary we can develop students' creativity, their spirit of observation, their imagination – sometimes it can become overflowing and it is absolutely necessary to use the studied language correctly.

In order to stimulate students' creativity, we must first identify their creative behavior by:

- observation – we can find out the students' interests, their way of thinking in an innovative spirit, their degree of intelligence, the interest they show for one or another field of activity;
- communication with students allows us to find out their intentions, the motivation that determines them to perform the creative act;

- the analysis of the products of the students' activity is more important in the evaluation of their creativity than the class activity. In general, in class students are appreciated for the knowledge they show, not necessarily for the originality and novelty of their ideas, of the materials they are able to create. And let us not forget that students' participation in extracurricular activities is determined by their motivation, their desire to research, to find out new things in the field they are interested in – thinking here about students' debating scientific circles, participation in scientific events and conferences or examinations for an internationally recognized degree in foreign languages.

However, we must not forget that modern education also requires the teacher to adapt to the new; we cannot educate students in a creative spirit if we, as teachers, are not creative. Therefore, we can speak today of both creative teaching and creative learning. In this context we are now referring to:

- collaboration relations with the students;
- research learning;
- appreciation of the students' ideas and activities and their acceptance;
- encourage students to always ask questions, to talk among themselves;
- encourage students to carry out individual or group activities and to favorably appreciate their creations;
- the students' tasks to be exciting, unconventional, to appeal to their imagination and creative possibilities, to stimulate their curiosity, critical spirit and observation;
- and, very important, to encourage students to overcome their fear of being ridiculously shy.

Therefore, on the one hand, there is creative learning, which, in the specialists' opinion, has remarkable results, on the other hand there is reproductive learning characteristic of the testing periods, examinations, assessments. If the first helps us deal with unpredictable situations, the second allows us to deal with predictable situations. Certain exercises that we work on in class put students in a position to improvise. However, improvisation requires the courage to face a new situation, to show imagination, to be creative.

To sum up, the fundamental aspects of creativity presented above are essential within foreign language acquisition.

3. The Connection between Creativity and Motivation in Foreign Language Acquisition

As with all features of teaching and learning there have been various attempts during the past centuries to find out what motivates a person to dedicate itself to certain subject matters or fields of interest. Why are certain students motivated to learn foreign languages (in our case English) whereas others in the same learning context remain more or less indifferent toward the second language (in our case German or French)? Since the 1950s the scientific endeavors to define motivation and to determine its main characteristics have significantly increased. Motivation is merely individualistic, it cannot be directly observed, it is not limited to learning in schools or universities and there is an always increasing number of related disciplines such as psychology or sociology that present theories and models of motivation.

Even though many foreign language teachers are convinced that motivational aspects, beside language learning aptitudes, are determining factors in foreign language classes, they are quite skeptical when it comes to certain theories. Most of the models elaborated up to now contain some truth, but cover only a minimal part of what motivates one student more than another one to dedicate himself or herself to the study of foreign languages.

A well-known psycho-sociological differentiation is that between integrative

and instrumental motivation. A student with an integrative motivation has a positive attitude toward the native speakers and other users of the second language (in our case German or French). The student wants to integrate to a certain point into the native speaker community. An instrumental motivation starts from the perspective that second language may be an important tool in the professional sector, e.g. missions abroad. For a long time integrative motivation was seen as the better one because of its non-utilitarian aims. Instrumental motivation was regarded as inferior as it seems to refer to less valuable (idealistic) outcomes. When researchers found out that instrumentally motivated learners did perform at least as well as those determined by integrative motivation, this distinction lost a great part of its influence. However, it is always difficult to separate the two motivational aspects from one another.

Another distinction is not really completely different from the differentiation into integrative and instrumental motivation, such as the classical division into extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsically motivated learners depend on any type of rewards, especially on grading. In addition, foreign language learners (in our case military personnel) often dispose of an instrumental motivation learning or perfecting their foreign language to get a higher position. Intrinsically motivated students learn the foreign language because they are interested in that specific language, the country, the people and their cultures, they prove joy and interest. Therefore their motivation is not far away from what is denominated integrative.

So, what can foreign language teachers do about stimulating their students' motivation for learning the foreign language? Two main factors determine the students' engagement. On the one hand, the learning objective has to make sense to them, so they must attribute a value to the goal. The students have to find positive answers for themselves to questions like: In what way can I take advantage from what is being learned for my present life or my professional future? What does the particular content mean in the world in which we live? On the other hand, if they convey a value to the learning content, they have to be convinced that they will be able to reach the objective. If students do not attribute any value to the targeted objective, it does not matter if they are convinced that they might reach it. How can teachers convince their students of the targeted goals?

First of all, the objectives chosen on the bases of the curriculum must be meaningful and interesting for the students and connected to their life context. Secondly, teachers should illustrate step-by-step the values of the specific subject matter, even if the students do not identify with those at once. Thirdly, learning processes have to be conceived in order to correspond to the students' needs for appreciation and recognition, as well as for social belonging (De Florio-Hansen, 2016).

Another question has to be taken into consideration: In what ways can teachers promote positive expectancies with regards to learning success? To answer this question the comprehensive research of Carol S. Dweck are very useful. According to Dweck (2012) students can be divided into two groups each of 40%. The rest of 20% cannot be classified. In her opinion, there are two groups: The first one consists of children and adolescents convinced that intelligence and aptitude for a subject matter (e.g. science, mathematics or foreign languages) are innate, and that these cannot be much influenced by effort and learning. That is why Carol S. Dweck calls a fixed mindset. The students of the second group believe that achievement can be improved by learning. These learners think that learning efforts can alter innate dispositions in a positive way. In Dweck's terminology, this is a growth mindset. The growth mindset is also very important for creative work because such work often requires higher levels of perseverance and learning efforts (De Florio-Hansen, 2016). Students

of the first group are sometimes imprisoned in a vicious circle. They avoid situations that make them seem less intelligent than their colleagues. Therefore they often refuse help as they do not want others to observe their inability and they try to rest in their confort zone. As time passes by, this attitude leads to increasing knowledge deficits. Learners with a fixed mindset consider the teacher's bad grading as proof for their inability. As one of the remedies for the fixed mindset Dweck (2007) suggests the analysis of biographies of famous personalities with learning problems. According to Dweck, teachers should spread the confidence that all learners, even those with a fixed mindset, can improve if they make the necessary efforts. The scientist is convinced that teachers should modify their practice of praise. General praise such as "well done" should be replaced by forms that lead to a growth mindset. At the same time, teachers should praise the student's creativity.

Dweck considers that *"In a poll of 143 creativity researchers, there was wide agreement about the number one ingredient in creative achievement. And it was exactly the kind of perseverance and resilience produced by growth mindset."* (Dweck, 2007, pp. 11-12). Moreover, there is also the idea that creativity is not innate and it can be developed just like any other skill. Research studies have revealed that, related to creativity, learners can hold both a growth and a fixed mindset at the same time. That is why it is said that successful learners have outstanding results because they are extremely gifted but, at the same time, some others' limited creative potential can be improved by learning efforts.

4. Practical Activities that Stimulate the Students' Creativity in Foreign Language Acquisition

The following are some suggestions for activities that can both stimulate the students' creativity and develop language skills.

Sharing one's own feelings. For the students it is very important to gain an understanding of identifying their own feelings and also let others know how they feel. Present some situations and invite students to be creative and say how they would act and feel in those particular situations. In terms of language, a meaningful context is being created for practicing reported speech and modal verbs, two quite difficult grammatical concepts.

What if I ...? This kind of activity requires students to hypothesize what their own feelings would be if they were in situations experienced by story protagonists. Being divided into small groups, the students have the opportunity to exchange ideas about their reactions and feelings. Students are asked: *What if you were in the situation of the protagonist? How would you feel? What if that happened to you?* This activity nurtures self-awareness by stimulating the students' creativity to provide reasons for their emotions and actions. This kind of activity is quite useful when introducing or reviewing conditionals, because it requires students to put themselves in hypothetical situations for which the context has already been established.

A method that functions very well is the use of CDs or DVDs. We can only use images without sound, instructing students to imagine dialogues starting only from images, character gestures, etc.

In conclusion, all this "game" of improvisation, development of creativity and imagination will prepare future officers for unforeseen communication situations. Their future will be the cooperation with military personnel from NATO structures, and the knowledge of one or more foreign languages will facilitate the accomplishment of the missions. Not to forget the chances that students have to improve through the Erasmus+ programme or courses abroad, and then not only creativity will help them, but also the notions of culture and civilization they have already acquired.

5. Conclusion

During the past decades scientific research caused major changes in the perception of students' learning styles. Empirical findings show that learning styles are neither innate nor unchangeable. On the contrary, students themselves adapt their learning behaviour to the task at hand and aim at trying out different learning styles using their creativity. Therefore teachers have to plan and propose activities that invite their students to recur to a number of learning strategies.

Newer research findings find a strong correlation between creativity and motivation. Motivation is often considered as a more stable and long-lasting individual characteristic. It is an important aim of purposeful teaching to help students to overcome their lack of motivation, caused by a fixed mindset, in order to develop a growth mindset by using their creativity.

In conclusion, for foreign language teachers especially those of English spoken all over the world, it is undoubtedly easier to convince their students of the value of the content to be learned than to reassure them that they can reach the targeted objectives. Therefore, newer research findings help students develop a positive attitude toward their own learning success.

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