Creativity-Nurturing Practices of Iranian EFL Teachers

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Abstract

The present study adopted a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design to explore the status of nurturing creativity in Iranian EFL classrooms. A standard questionnaire was given to 214 public high school EFL teachers to rate the frequency of using creativity-nurturing strategies in their classrooms. While the curriculum policies stipulate creativity-nurturing strategies, the results suggested that the teachers do not frequently adopt the strategies. Further, interviews were conducted with the teachers to find out the factors hindering the teachers from using these strategies. Deductive thematic analysis of interview transcriptions led to the extraction of five themes regarded as attributes to the inability of Iranian EFL teachers to adopt creativity-nurturing strategies. The findings imply that the existence of performativity in Iranian EFL classrooms creates pressure and dilemma for EFL teachers to teach for creativity. Issues such as time, exams, and pressures of the curriculum strictly constrain the creativity-nurturing practices of these teachers. Generally, modifications need to be supported in various aspects of teaching English in Iran to help the teachers nurture creativity in the classrooms.

Keywords: creativity, Iranian EFL teachers, nurturing creativity, test-centric instruction, training programs

Creativity is considerably needed in today's expeditious, fluctuating world (Gabora & Unrau, 2019). It is described as the solution to many difficult problems of the 21st century (Jones & Richards, 2016). It is also considered a vital factor in achieving success in any field, including education. The improvement of creativity in academic institutions has been considered an educational aim because it can prepare children for an unreliable future (Beghetto, 2010). As Fisher (2004) put it, creative activity can refresh the interest of students that has been turned off by schools. It is an attribute that contributes to children's personal development, decision-making, problem-solving abilities, and academic learning (Beghetto, 2013; Cropley, 2018; Gajda et al., 2017; Gralewski & Karwowski, 2012; Karwowski et al., 2020). Creativity in

education in Iran has been taken into consideration in various documents. For example, the Fundamental Reform Document of Education (FRDE) in the Islamic Republic of Iran has emphasized creativity.

Regarding language education, the centrality of creativity in language learning and teaching has been mentioned in various studies (Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 2016; Jones & Richards, 2016; Maley & Kiss, 2017; Richards & Cotterall, 2016). These studies emphasized that not only creativity makes people better language learners, but also language learning can cultivate creativity in learners. Therefore, language teachers and learners need to work together to exercise creativity in the classrooms. EFL classes need creative teachers who find and solve problems, prepare carefully, listen to students, and support student involvement. As Ellis (2016) mentioned, when people are involved in language teaching and learning, their experiences, dispositions, relationships, and behaviors with one another can bring about conditions to nurture creativity.

At the same time, creativity and creativity-nurturing teaching has faced many obstacles, such as, standardized curricula and materials, consequential high-stake language tests, and pressure on teachers to meet externally imposed yardsticks (Richards, 2013). Additionally, it seems that creativity in language teaching in Iran has been damaged because the Iran Ministry of Education has not supported EFL teachers with the required tools, facilities, and freedom to amalgamate creativity in curricula and classrooms. To make sure, interviewing teachers as a reliable source of information can be used to explore their actions, practices, and behaviors to find out whether students' creativity is nurtured through training and facilitation. For this study, the main focus is on the status of nurturing creativity in language education in Iran. Specifically, the present study has tried to consider the daily practices and behaviors of Iranian EFL teachers to see whether they nurture creativity in the students. Accordingly, attempts have been made to answer the following questions.

(1) To what extent do Iranian EFL teachers adopt creativity-nurturing strategies in their classrooms?

(2) What factors may account for the success or failure of Iranian EFL teachers in nurturing creativity in their students?

Creativity in the Classroom

As previously stated, creativity is an indispensable element in any area, but it is difficult to find an encompassing definition for it. Jones and Richards (2016) mentioned that creativity is multidimensional. Thus, all the possible definitions with their characteristics can be considered and accepted in terms of particular communities (Meihami, 2022). Various definitions and conceptualizations of creativity have been proposed so far (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014; Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Glăveanu, 2013; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009; Rhodes, 1961; Simonton, 2012; Sternberg & Lubart, 1991). For example, Rhodes (1961) proposed the Four P's, including person, processes, product, and press (environment), which was transformed into the Five A's by Glăveanu's (2013), namely the actor, action, artifact, audience, and affordances. Sternberg and Lubart (1991) also suggested six resources – intellectual abilities, knowledge, styles of thinking, personality, motivation, and environment – as a framework. Beghetto (2017) categorized creativity into three forms in the domain of teaching: teaching about creativity, teaching for creativity, and teaching with creativity. Teaching for creativity, which is the focus of this study, deals with teachers' efforts to cultivate students' creativity. Similarly, Kaufman and Beghetto (2009) proposed the Four Cs developmental framework to understand creativity.

The model contains mini-c, little c, pro-c, and big c. Mini-c creativity is the lowest level of the model. It relates to self-discovering meaningful perceptions and interpretations innate in the

learning process (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014). Mini-c creativity can be identified as little c when people share their mini-c perceptions with others (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007). Little c is called everyday creativity. Mini-c and little c are the most relevant for schools and classrooms (Beghetto, 2019). Also, the collaborative, communicative, and helping nature of teachers is apparent in mini c and little c levels (Beghetto, 2019). In other words, teachers are central to nurturing creativity in students in the classroom context (Mullet et al., 2016). Teachers and students can cooperate to create conversations, activities, and relationships, which lead to creativity (Jones, 2016). Some activities (Appendix A) can be exercised in the classroom to nurture students' creativity individually (1, 2, 3, 6 & 10), collaboratively (4, 5, 8 & 9), and through technology (7). For instance, when students have ideas, the teacher gets them to explore further before they take a stand (promoting critical thinking, number 2), or when the weather is fine, the teacher teaches outside. So, the students work with active and fun activities that they cannot do inside (creating a new learning environment, number 4). In the present study, the sociocultural theory of creativity (Glăveanu, 2020) was taken into consideration. To be exact, creativity is defined and considered as "exchanging positions and perspectives, within and between individuals, to foster creative processes"(Glăveanu, 2020, p. 1). Consequently, Iranian EFL teachers' and students' relations, interactions, and behaviors in the classroom context were taken into account to investigate the creativity-fostering behaviors of the teachers.

Literature Review

A great deal of studies has been conducted in the area of creativity in education (e.g., Al-Dababneh et al., 2017; Baer & Garrett, 2010; Davies et al., 2012; Dewett, 2007; Glăveanu, 2018; Gu et al., 2021; Horng et al., 2005; de Souza Fleith, 2000; Tan, 2001). Many of these works have tried to investigate various characteristics of creativity, such as flexibility, independence, and risk-taking, and find factors affecting creative teaching and teaching for creativity (e.g., de Bruin & Harris, 2017; Doron, 2016; Gu et al., 2021; McLellan & Nicholl, 2013; Soh, 2000). Additionally, the necessity of an appropriate scale to assess creative teaching and teaching for creativity has motivated some researchers to develop related instruments. For example, Soh (2000) conducted a study to develop and validate a 45-item self-rating scale to measure teachers' creativity-fostering behaviors. The Creativity Fostering Teaching Index (CFTI) was developed while emphasizing the absence of suitable measuring instruments for assessing teachers' creativity-fostering behaviors in education. The index has been used in large numbers of studies and was adopted as one of the data-gathering instruments in the present study.

Factors related to environment may affect the teachers' efforts to foster creativity and thinking skills in the students. Gu et al. (2021) conducted two studies simultaneously to investigate the effect of school education (school type and perceived teaching style) on the creativity of students at the university entrance level through a retrospective approach and found that university students studied in alternative schools outperformed in tasks related to divergent thinking than those who studied in traditional and religious schools. That is, school type makes a difference. Huang et al. (2021) explored the relationship between school-level factors and individual-level factors and teaching for creativity in China. They found that not only metacognition and enthusiasm were vital to teaching for creativity, but also general collaboration in teaching and colleague innovation were influential facilitators of teaching for creativity. Hondzel (2013) also found that the interrelated nature of the classroom and school environment and irrepressible environmental factors, for instance, administrators, colleagues, and testing, determine teachers' attempts to sustain and create a creative classroom atmosphere. Similarly, the findings of de Souza Fleith's (2000) study indicated that the environment plays a vital role in enhancing or inhibiting creativity in the classroom. The climate in the classrooms, which is not conducive to creativity, is influenced by many aspects that may be outside the

control of the teachers (de Bruin & Harris, 2017; McLellan & Nicholl, 2013).

Teachers' conceptions, beliefs, and personalities can play a significant role in creativity-fostering classrooms. Chan and Yuen (2014) pointed out that creativity beliefs and creative personalities influence the creativity-enhancing behaviors of teachers. Some teachers may hold conflicting beliefs regarding teaching creativity (Katz-Buonincontro et al., 2020). Although many teachers value creativity and regard fostering creative thoughts as an important element for personal development and effective learning, their conceptions of creativity do not correspond with creativity theory and research (Wang & Kokotsaki, 2018). As Mullet et al. (2016) explained, some teachers feel they are not prepared to nurture creativity in the classrooms; they also associate creativity with the arts. This has an impact on their beliefs of creativity and creative students.

Other issues have been raised as influencing creative teaching and teaching for creativity such as training program, policy, the role of teacher educators, and testing and assessment. Doron (2016) assessed the effectiveness of a training programs on divergent thinking skills to enhance the creative thinking abilities of a group of school-aged children and found that the training program, which was specially developed and practiced, enhanced the divergent thinking skills of students. Besides, Henriksen et al. (2019) discussed the relationship between teachers' practical needs and political considerations for creativity in the classroom by considering the political environments. They explained that creative learning and teaching call for people to take a risk, fail, and reflect. They concluded that there is a disconnection between policy and the needs of teachers in creative teaching or in fostering creativity in the classroom. Additionally, several studies (Duffy et al., 2009; Edinger, 2008; Harris, 2016; Jones et al., 2003; Kim & Chae, 2019) have emphasized the direct influences of testing and assessment on creativity and creative teaching.

Some studies have been conducted in the area of applied linguistics. Al-Qahtani (2016) investigated whether or not creativity is promoted by Saudi EFL teachers in the classrooms. This study also considered EFL teachers' perceptions and attitudes concerning creativity. The results evidenced that most Saudi EFL teachers do not encourage creativity in their teaching practices. Interview data indicated that there are some reasons for not fostering creativity in EFL classes. The teachers pointed out that 1) the concept of creativity is not clear to them, 2) creativity is not appropriate in language teaching, 3) creativity is not supported in EFL textbooks, 4) Saudi students have not been prepared cognitively to manage creative activities and tasks, 5) teacher training programs do not focus on promoting creativity, 6) there are Constraints such as involving students and lack of enough time. Hana and Hacène (2017) investigated Algerian EFL teachers' knowledge concerning creative thinking skills concepts. They also attempted to explore these teachers' perceptions of creativity and its integration in EFL classrooms. The results indicated that although the teachers hold positive attitudes towards nurturing creative thinking skills in the EFL classroom, they think that they do not have the necessary capabilities to teach these skills. The teachers believed that they were not trained and prepared to cultivate creativity in their classrooms. Cho and Kim (2018) conducted a study to investigate the role language plays in promoting creativity in EFL classrooms. They offered five different types of language play and helped teachers integrate them into L2 classrooms. They argued that playful and creative language use could develop the creative ability of the students. They concluded that the role of teachers in creating active and participatory classroom environments is vital. Liao et al. (2018) also investigated the influence of creativity instruction on learning performance, creativity, and learning motivation in EFL classrooms. The instruments included an English receptive vocabulary test, the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking, and an English learning motivation questionnaire. Two groups were involved in this study. The experimental group worked with EFL creativity-enhancing activities for eight

weeks, and the control group was taught a regular EFL curriculum. The results of the one-way analysis of covariance showed that creativity technique teaching significantly developed learners' English learning performance, creativity, and learning motivation.

Few studies have been done in the context of Iran. For example, Meihami (2022) proposed autonomy, knowledge, reflection, and traits as four concepts that EFL teacher educators can utilize to develop EFL teachers' capacity to teach for creativity. He discussed that teacher educators ought to be aware of teachers' flexibility and reflection on their prior experiences and amalgamation of domain-specific and domain-general traits.

Taken together, various factors contribute to encouraging conditions for enhancing the creative potential of students to learn and achieve in any field in general and the English language in particular. Additionally, creativity cannot be explained and understood without the context of teaching and learning. In other words, creativity is the result of people's thoughts and a sociocultural context interaction (de Souza Fleith, 2000). Regarding English teaching in Iran, there is a lack of research exploring teaching for creativity with a main focus on the teachers. Thus, research needs to be conducted to find out how Iranian EFL teachers provide creative instruction to the students and whether they cultivate creativity in their students.

Method

Design of the Study

This study utilized an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. The rationale for a mix-methods research design is to better understand the research problem and to achieve complementary data on the same topic. The design first gathers and analyzes quantitative and then qualitative data in two consecutive steps (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The qualitative data enrich the findings through an in-depth examination of participants' views (Ivankova et al., 2006).

Participants

The participants consisted of 214 Iranian EFL teachers teaching at public high schools in four provinces including Ilam, Khuzestan, Lorestan, and Markazi during the years 2020 and 2021. These EFL teachers were considered since they were teaching the same instructional materials within the same educational system. Convenience sampling was used, that is, the participants who were more accessible to the researchers were selected, and the economic and educational conditions of the provinces were considered. Two of the four provinces (Khuzestan and Markazi) are among the developed provinces economically and educationally and Lorestan and Ilam provinces are not so much developed in terms of economy and education.

The participants were both males (113) and females (101). They ranged in age from 22 to 48. All of them held BA, MA, or PhD university degrees in English language teaching or literature. Their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 30 years. More than forty teachers were ready to participate in the interview; finally, twenty-six were interviewed because saturation was achieved. The researchers did not discover new information in data analysis and they felt that similar comments and explanations are heard. Thus, they stopped collecting more data and analyzed the gathered data. Twenty-six teachers who were interviewed were representative of the total number of participants since all Iranian EFL teachers were teaching the same instructional materials within the same educational system.

Instruments

Survey. To investigate Iranian EFL teachers' perspectives on their creativity-nurturing practices, the CFTI (Soh, 2000) was adopted. The CFTI is capable of making a substantial formative contribution to teachers' understanding of the nature of creativity and of their role in

fostering its development. The questionnaire contained a demographic information section including age, sex, years of teaching experience, degree, grade of teaching, and urban or rural schools. The teachers rated their views concerning their classroom practices on a questionnaire including 45 items, which uses a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 6. One of the six codes should be rated for each strategy to indicate how often the teachers do them: one (never) to six (all the time). Soh (2015) also mentioned that "the choice of six points was to discourage the probable tendency of respondents to endorse the neutral mid-point and this, hopefully, would maximize the variance in the scores"(p.3). The CFTI contains nine subscales, including independence, integration, motivation, judgment, flexibility, evaluation, question, opportunities, and frustration. Each scale consists of 5 items. For example, item number one, "I encourage students to show me what they have learned on their own" is related to the independence scale, and item number 2, "In my class, students have opportunities to share ideas and views." is attributed to the integration scale.

To be more comprehensible for the teachers, the CFTI was translated into Persian by two PhDs in translation. The establishment of its validity and reliability has been done in two ways. First, the Persian version was back-translated into English by two of the researchers. The original and back-translated versions were compared, and discrepancies were discussed and resolved by the researchers. The ultimate Persian version of the CFTI was prepared to use after scrutinizing by the researchers. Second, as a pilot testing of the translated questionnaire, ten EFL teachers read and completed the Persian version. Any vague points regarding their understanding of the items on the questionnaire were considered and modified according to the feedback from these teachers. Additionally, the results of the factor analysis of the Persian version were satisfactory. Therefore, the validity of the Persian version was assured. Also, as presented in Table 1, the results of Cronbach's alpha for the whole questionnaire and the individual subscales were acceptable.

Table1. Reliability of the Persian version of CFTI and its Subscales

Scales	Reliability	N of Items
Independence	.88	5
Integration	.82	5
Motivation	.75	5
Judgment	.70	5
Flexibility	.71	5
Evaluation	.64	5
Question	.76	5
Opportunities	.78	5
Frustration	.71	5
Overall	.84	45

Interview. In line with the design of the study to implement and elaborate on the quantitative results, sixteen questions were formed on topics closely related to creativity-nurturing experiences, practices, and behaviors of the teachers by examining and scrutinizing the questionnaire and the related literature (Cropley, 1997; Jones & Richards, 2016; Richards, 2013; Soh, 2000). The questions were translated into Persian. Seven English teachers were

asked to read and describe the questions carefully. Some modifications were made based on teachers' descriptions, suggestions, and feedback. Finally, 12 questions (see Appendix B) were chosen for the interview. The interviewer was an English teacher who worked for the Ministry of Education and all interview participants were English teachers who worked in public high schools too. The interviewer called them 'colleagues'; thus, the mutual background between the interviewer and interviewees could establish and sustain confidence and rapport (Berg, 2004). The interview was held in Persian. Furthermore, some demographic questions were asked regarding their ages, degrees, teaching experience, and the place where they teach (rural or urban). To clarify special points, the teachers were asked to explain certain areas, provide examples, or tell related stories. Due to the coronavirus outbreak, all interviews were conducted via telephone and were recorded. Each interview lasted approximately 30−50 minutes.

To analyze the data, recorded interviews were transcribed through intelligent verbatim transcription. In this kind of transcription, the meanings of what was said and explained were more significant than the exact words said by the participants. Then, deductive thematic analysis of interview transcripts was used to identify common themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the researchers followed a six-step analysis. First, to get familiar with the data, they transcribed data, read and reread the data, and noted down initial ideas. Second, to produce initial codes, thought-provoking features of the data across the whole data were coded, and relevant data were identified with each code. Third, to search for themes, the codes were combined into potential themes and all data relevant to each potential theme were collected, in other words, the researchers devised a set of candidate themes. Fourth, the transcripts were reviewed and refined to make sure about the accuracy of the themes, namely, the researchers tried to read all the coded extracts of each theme and checked to see whether they form a comprehensible pattern. Fifth, to define and name themes, the nature of each theme was determined, and the aspects of the data each theme captured, were determined, and themes were named as school environment, absence of involving procedures, absence of teacher training and collaboration, lack of rapport, and testing and assessment. Finally, vivid and enough extract examples of data were provided to demonstrate the occurrence of the themes.

The Rigor of the Study

The study was piloted to ensure credibility, transferability, and dependability of the qualitative findings. Regarding credibility, the researchers first asked four teachers who were familiar with different types of qualitative data analyses to express their opinions about the themes and discussion. The researchers considered the feedback received from these teachers. Second, some exact explanations of the participants were reported in the results section to assist readers to see themselves through the participants' eyes. Additionally, concerning transferability, attempts have been made by the researchers to describe the findings in a way to allow the readers to obtain a fairly inclusive view of the context which may enable them to carry out a similar study in other similar settings. Finally, to approve a suitable level of dependability of the findings, the researchers asked an outside researcher to look over the data collection and analysis processes. He arrived at similar findings and conclusions concerning the data. As a PhD in statistics, he had qualifications in both research and teaching.

Results

Quantitative Results

Three hundred and twenty-two of the teachers were requested to complete the questionnaire using an online survey form available via a web link. Finally, 214 teachers filled out and returned the questionnaire. Data collected through the questionnaire were run by the SPSS version 26 to find out the frequencies of using creativity-nurturing strategies by Iranian EFL

teachers in their classrooms. As Table 2 illustrates, the means of the teachers' responses for the subscales indicated fairly low levels of creativity-nurturing strategies.

Table 2. Means of Item Subscales of the Teachers' Responses to the CFTI (Soh, 2000)

Item	CFTI Question and Mean for Each Subscale					Combined Mean
Independence	1 = 2.31	10 = 1.84	19 = 3.89	28 = 2.73	37 = 4.31	3.01
Integration	2 = 2.45	11 = 3.68	20 = 2.94	29 = 5.68	38 = 3.47	3.64
Motivation	3 = 2.27	12 = 5.26	21 = 1.42	30 = 1.99	39 = 2.42	2.76
Judgment	4 = 2.79	13 = 3.78	22 = 2.35	31 = 3.42	40 = 2.68	3.00
Flexibility	5 = 4.57	14 = 1.53	23 = 1.91	32 = 3.73	41 = 1.81	2.71
Evaluation	6 = 4.73	15 = 2.73	24 = 3.05	33 = 2.46	42 = 3.62	3.31
Question	7 = 2.32	16 = 5.32	25 = 4.42	34 = 2.11	43 = 2.25	3.28
Opportunities	8 = 2.66	17 = 4.57	26 = 3.45	35 = 1.96	44 = 3.73	3.27
Frustration	9 = 3.92	18 = 3.57	27 = 3.42	36 = 4.36	45 = 4.88	4.03
Combined mean score of scales						3.22

As Edinger (2008) explained, the means of creativity-nurturing strategies can be divided into six levels (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). Mean of 1 indicates that the strategy has never been used by the teachers. Mean of 2 shows that the strategy has rarely been adopted. Mean of 3 displays that the strategy has sometimes been applied. Mean of 4 indicates that the strategy has often been utilized. Mean of 5 shows that the strategy has usually been used. Finally, mean of 6 illustrates that the strategy has always been adopted. Moreover, Hondzel (2013) explicated that 4.82 on a scale maximum of 6 can be considered fairly high levels of creativity-fostering behaviors. Accordingly, mean of 4 was considered as a cut-off score. In other words, mean of 4 or more of a strategy may suggest that the teachers have used it frequently and a mean lower than 4 of a strategy may indicate that it has not been applied very much by the teachers.

Qualitative Results

The deductive thematic analysis of the interview data led to the extraction of the following five categories: school environment, absence of involving procedures, absence of teacher training and collaboration, lack of rapport, and testing and assessment.

School Environment. Most of the teachers stated that they are not satisfied with the school environment in terms of the physical and educational environment, resources, teaching aids, technological equipment, and teaching time. Issues such as university entrance exams, teaching aid and resources, class size, limited teaching time and facilities, and internet access were raised as main impediments to effective English teaching. They said that due to the lack of support and financial resources, schools could not provide facilities and teaching tools for the teachers, especially in rural areas.

Amin explained: *No, I'm not satisfied with the school environment. I really feel lack of facilities. Teaching aids and resources can invoke students' imagination and create new opportunities for learning English. Watching a short clip about the lesson can provoke students' interest in learning.* Nasrin commented on the environment: *I teach English in a small city. Schools in this district are lacking in resources and facilities. The only thing that is available for me to teach English is a whiteboard. In this high-poverty school, there is no CD player to work on listening skill let alone an overhead projector or language lab. School principals are always complaining about the lack of school budget.*

Another important point mentioned by the majority of the teachers which is directly related to classroom environment was class size. For example, Roya explained:…. *Classrooms are full*

of students which makes it difficult for me to teach properly. I cannot manage the classroom and it takes a lot of my time to check students' homework…..

Absence of involving procedures. Generally, the results indicated that Iranian EFL teachers do not involve their students very much in classroom tasks, namely, classroom activities are not student-centered, interaction-oriented, or challenge-based. Also. the teacher's methods of assessing and asking questions in the classroom do not lead to the students' involvement. Furthermore, out-of-class communication between teachers and students is not common. They just try to involve their students out of school by giving them common homework. As most of them explained, classroom activities are depended on the amount of time to be challenging and explained impediments such as the status of learning English among school subjects and teaching time. Some of the teachers said that learning a language is not a priority for high school students. For example, Fatemeh explained that: *I like to let my students try their own ways of doing classroom assignments and help them work in groups to find answers to the questions, but it takes a great deal of time*. Ahmadreza stated that: *Learning subjects such as biology, math, and physics is more important than English. These subjects play a vital role in the university entrance exam. So, students do not involve themselves with English.*

Lack of rapport. While nearly all 26 teachers stated that they like to make every student feel relaxed and confident in the first related question, most teachers were reluctant to admit the students' suggestions and criticisms, even though they listen to them. More than half of the teachers mentioned that some students do not take the class seriously when they see the flexibility in our behaviors. Additionally, most of them said that they do not trust their students and the students are not allowed to have a choice about the work they do. Five teachers mentioned that we do not take a moment to see the world from the views of the students to show sympathy and build rapport. Ahmad stated that *I need to cover all the elements of the curriculum based on my lesson plan because the students should be prepared for a test. If I want to listen to all students' suggestions and ideas two problems arise: first, I cannot cover the curriculum because of class time and second chaos can occur in the classroom*. Saeedeh explained: *I encourage students to ask questions and express their ideas about their work, but not any questions and suggestions. When I let students express any idea and ask any question, their behavior deviates from class norms. Even some students try to ask ridiculous questions*.

Absence of teacher training and collaboration. Most teachers stated that they have not participated in any workshops in recent years. Almost all of them pointed out that they have never taken part in workshops about creative teaching or teaching for creativity. About 20 teachers said that they never consult with their colleagues because they hardly ever meet each other. Some mentioned that some of their colleagues have been stuck in the past. They strictly follow the curriculum through rote learning. They are not ready to teach based on their preferred styles of more personalized teaching and open classroom management. Just one teacher said that he was invited to develop an English curriculum for high school students. Generally, Iranian EFL teachers rarely convene in workshops, seminars, and academic gatherings. Just Molana said that *he was invited to develop an English curriculum for high school students*. Samira stated that *We hadn't had concrete examples of teacher training courses or workshops in recent years*. Another teacher explained that *I have five-year experience in teaching English in this district. During these five years, we (EFL teachers) have gathered together to share our experience just once. We hardly ever see each other.*

Testing and assessment. All teachers explained that they are under pressure to prepare the students for a test. Some teachers indicated that there is an inconsistency between the demands placed on them by preparing the students for a test and their preferred teaching methods to teach English. Also, the university entrance exam was described as the main barrier to effective

teaching. This exam was explained as the central cause for teaching to the test. Most of the teachers stated that preparing students to be successful in this exam is the ultimate goal for schools, parents, and society. Entering university and getting a good job is regarded as the main goal of secondary education in Iran. Reza, a PhD student in TEFL, stated:…. *I like to teach based on what I have learned from my studies. I tend to teach my students the best way I can, but I have to teach in a way to prepare them for a test...... * Mustafa mentioned that *Many students are interested in what they need to do to get a better score so they like to learn how to get a good score and ask us to train them test-taking strategies.*

One important point worth mentioning is that most teachers especially those who are working in urban districts said that our teaching is severely affected by the school atmosphere in which students compete for good marks. They commented that they were challenged by school principals and parents who wanted the students to be prepared for university entrance exams. Masood commented: *I am not satisfied with the school environment because we have to prepare the students for tests at any cost.*

Discussion

Quantitative Discussion: The Extent to which Iranian EFL Teachers Adopt Creativity-Nurturing Strategies in their Classrooms

As can be seen in Table 2, the means of scales ranged from 2.71 to 4.03. The combined mean score of all scales is 3.22, only one of which was greater than the middle point of 4 but just barely. This demonstrated that creativity-nurturing strategies are not used at an acceptable level by Iranian EFL teachers. Hondzel (2013) explained that higher scores on scales show that teachers perform more creativity-fostering behaviors. Generally, teaching for creativity is not a usual trend in Iranian EFL classrooms. This low-level use of creativity-nurturing teaching may be attributed to the perceptions and beliefs Iranian EFL teachers hold concerning the nature of creativity and students' creativity. As Hondzel (2013) mentioned, "Teacher perceptions regarding creativity can have a negative, neutral, or positive impact on the classroom environment, differentially reinforcing or preventing students from demonstrating creative behaviors and ideas"(p. 56). It seems that Iranian EFL teachers hold negative or at least neutral views about creativity. These teachers may not believe in components that can foster creativity in the classroom such as paying attention to students' creative ideas and products; encouraging them to take rational risks; considering their mistakes as a part of learning; encouraging students to ask questions, and helping them to find solutions to problems (Starko, 1995; Sternberg & Williams, 1996). On the contrary, these teachers may support completion, evaluation, rote learning, and conformity, which destroy creativity in the classroom (Amabile, 1988). It can be said that teachers' misconceptions and disbeliefs about the students' ability to be creative may have an impact on adopting creativity-fostering strategies in their classrooms (Katz-Buonincontro et al., 2020; Mullet et al., 2016). Thus, there seems to be a consistency between the teachers' misconceptions and their practices in teaching English in Iran. It can be concluded that there seems to be an absence of agreement and overall understanding among Iranian EFL teachers of how best to apply creativity-nurturing strategies in the classroom. This is mentioned by Edinger (2008), who stated that "diversity of teachers' behaviors may be evidence of a lack of agreement and a general understanding of how best to approach the fostering of creativity" (p. 128).

Additionally, infrequent use of these strategies can be related to the existence of factors outside the teachers' control, such as the inaccessibility of instructional resources, the quality of educational programs, the socioeconomics of the school district, and standardized testing (de Bruin & Harris, 2017; Edinger, 2008; McLellan & Nicholl, 2013; de Souza Fleith, 2000). As Soh (2017) mentioned, teachers' and students' interaction and the relation that may lead to

fostering creativity can be influenced by factors that are completely outside of a teacher's control. For example, there are two groups of schools in Iran namely, high-poverty rural schools including public high schools with populated classrooms and lack of needed facilities, and well-resourced and well-equipped urban high schools. Selecting which school to teach is out of the teachers' control because the teachers are sent to different schools based on their teaching experiences or degrees. Accordingly, to be exact, it is necessary to talk to teachers to find out the origins of the teachers' misconceptions about creativity and interfering factors hindering them to use creativity-nurturing strategies.

Qualitative Discussion: Factors Accounting for the inability of Iranian EFL Teachers to Nurture Creativity in the Students.

As previously stated, the factors extracted from the thematic analysis of the interviews were: school environment, absence of involving procedures, lack of rapport, absence of teacher training and collaboration, and testing and assessment. Environmental factors such as university entrance exam, class size, limited teaching time and facilities, and internet access have an excessive impact on creativity (Amabile, 1988). Moreover, it was mentioned that physical and social environments can influence creative capacity and whether and how it emerges (Chan & Yuen, 2014; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Hunter et al., 2007).

Dissatisfaction with the school environment in terms of the physical and educational environment, resources, teaching aids, and teaching time hinders teachers from fostering students' creativity. Therefore, these environmental aspects have a direct impact on teaching for creativity in Iranian EFL classrooms. The teachers' explanations evidenced that English education in Iran, or at least in the four provinces under investigation, is not capable of preparing a suitable environment for creative teaching or teaching for creativity. A few studies confirmed the pivotal role of the environment. For example, Hondzel (2013) discovered that the school environment is full of distractions, and contains a wide range of events and occurrences hindering creativity-nurturing teaching. Patston (2017) also found that variables such as school administration, available resources, technology, and classroom atmosphere can influence the creativity-nurturing behaviors of teachers.

It can also be argued that while technological advancements are used by Iranians every day, schools have not provided the technologies for the students and teachers. The finding evidenced that most schools, especially rural ones in Iran, cannot attract the resources needed to form and sustain creativity-nurturing environments. Technological developments and the virtual world can also influence students' school lives and can create an interesting and new context for learning, which enhances students' creativity. It is noted (Glăveanu et al., 2019; Huh & Lee, 2020) that technology can create opportunities for learners to access a range of different situations and viewpoints from which to approach, conceptualize, and go along with the world., Huh and Lee (2020) also emphasized that teaching language in creative ways such as technology integration helps language learners develop creativity. Generally, language teaching in Iran suffers from long-lasting environmental elements that have damaged creativity-nurturing teaching.

Concerning the absence of involving procedures and activities, the finding evidenced that encouraging students in challenging procedures and activities is not a usual trend to learn or teach English in Iran. Involvement can be exercised by encouraging students to learn both inside and outside of school, through student-centered, interaction-oriented, challenge-based, and risk-taking tasks and activities. For example, Dörnyei, (2001, as cited in Richards & Cotteral, 2016) identifies challenge as a feature of productive language-learning tasks that can also encourage creative responses "Tasks in which learners solve problems, discover something, overcome obstacles, or find information" (Richards & Cotteral, 2016, p. 102).

These kinds of tasks and activities are rarely practiced in Iranian EFL classrooms. The finding also illustrated that classroom activities are depended on the amount of time to be involving. The participants mentioned impediments to involvement such as the status of learning English among school subjects and teaching time. It can be argued that allowing students to get involved, solve problems, do classroom assignments, and overcome learning barriers require a sufficient amount of time. Dewett (2007) explained that willingness to take intellectual risks has always been vital to creativity. It is also noted that creative learning and teaching calls for people to risk and to reflect and integrate what they have learned, and try again (Smith & Henriksen, 2016). Konner (2010) stated that when children feel safe they discover and involve in playful trial and error. Thus, a high amount of challenge and involvement makes students feel motivated and lead to learning (McLellan & Nicholl, 2013). Gabora and Unrau (2019) found that one "way of nurturing creativity is by raising questions and challenges, followed by experiencing opportunities for solitude and reflection or group discussion to foster the honing of new approaches and ideas" (p. 148). Generally, while these studies emphasized the integral role of involvement in cultivating creativity, factors such as time and students' beliefs towards English as an unnecessary subject in school, impede students' involvement and creativity.

Regarding the lack of good rapport, the finding indicated that Iranian EFL teachers do not build reasonable rapport with their students. To build and maintain rapport, teachers need to identify their students, and take a moment to pay attention to their reactions, suggestions, and criticisms. Lack of enough time was mentioned as the main barrier to considering their students' ideas and suggestions. The findings evidenced that some students do not take the class seriously when they see the flexibility in the teachers' behaviors. Additionally, most Iranian EFL teachers said that they do not trust their students. Most of them do not let their students have a choice about the work they do. These findings are not in line with those of a study done by Henriksen et al. (2019), in which they explained that "in order not to miss some of the best insights and inspirations, students should have the freedom to explore lots of ideas, even risky ones or ideas that may fail at the first try "(p. 6). Catt et al. (2007) explained that rapport is characterized as a general feeling between people consisting of trust, personal involvement, and a prosocial bond. Hondzel (2013) also found that teachers should make attempts to foster safety, trust, and confidence in the students to regulate the emotional climate to promote creativity in the classroom. It can be argued that creating a warming and friendly climate in which students have the freedom to criticize and express their opinions and suggestions can nurture and enhance creativity in the students. Students should feel that their suggestions and ideas would not be judged undesirably. Furthermore, learning relationships between teachers and students, which are constructive and trusting, may encourage creative attitudes, stimulate flexible, imaginative possibility thinking, and nurture problem-solving and divergent thinking (Craft, 2005; Harris & de Bruin, 2017).

It can be concluded that factors such as severe organizational and educational constraints and teachers' negative attitudes towards creativity damage Iranian EFL teachers' and students' relationships. Generally, it seems that Iranian EFL teachers do not like personality traits related to creativity which can be originated from the belief that creative students are disruptive. Also, they are expected to cover the textbook thoroughly within a limited amount of time. While the above-mentioned factors can hinder a good rapport between the teachers and the students, the point worth mentioning is that Iranian EFL teachers' fear of damaging their authority may be another factor influencing a constructive rapport with their students.

The absence of teacher training and collaboration, the data indicated a fairly low level of teacher training and collaboration. Collaboration in the present study means sharing creative ideas on how to teach different skills and components of English. This can result in adopting these ideas in the classroom. Also, training plays a vital role in helping teachers learn how to

nurture creativity in their students. Training, collaboration, and support from teacher trainers, experienced teachers, and curriculum developers, and having the opportunity to participate in workshops and consulting and working together with other teachers can bring about the exchange of strategies for fostering creativity in teaching English.

Training and collaboration are vital in improving common understandings, practices, and goals among teachers (Doron, 2016; Gonzalez-Gomez & Richter, 2015; Hunter et al., 2007; Perry-Smith, 2006; Reeves et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2004). Collaboration to be informed about each other's innovative ideas, creative activities, critical and constructive feedback, and creativity-nurturing practices can deepen teachers' mutual understanding and social connections, which further supports the integration of creative ideas and practices. Also, collaboration plays an inspiring role in individual creativity (Davies et al., 2013). "To create involves, fundamentally, collaborating with others either in an implicit or explicit manner" (Glăveanu et al., 2019, p. 64). When interaction and collaboration among different team members occur, it leads to cognitive stimulation which allows them to gain experience while working together to constrict creative solutions that could not occur individually (Baruah & Paulus, 2009; Huang et al., 2021; Nijstad & Stroebe, 2006; Paulus & Brown, 2007). Thus, being able to take the views of others (other teachers, colleagues, teacher educators, competitors, critics) and learn to share and manage perspectives or viewpoints can enable teachers to act creatively in teaching English. Moreover, participating in the workshops and developing a curriculum as a kind of perspective-taking enables teachers to understand and engage in the reality of English learning and teaching.

As a result, this finding evidenced that collaboration and training are not among the first priorities for Iranian EFL teachers. That is, most of them have not participated in any workshops in recent years. Consultation among these teachers might not be considered a way to learn and train from each other. Additionally, Iranian EFL teachers rarely convene in seminars and academic gatherings. Generally, a lack of collaboration and training is easily noticed among these teachers, and interaction among them occurs sporadically.

Testing and assessment are inseparable parts of language education in Iran. The findings indicated that Iranian EFL teachers are pressured to prepare the students for a test. Moreover, the university entrance exam (Konkor) as a high-stakes test was described as the main reason for ineffective teaching. Entering university and getting a good job are regarded as the main goals of secondary education in Iran. These findings are in line with those of the following studies. Assessments and standardized testing have direct consequences for the person or institution being tested or assessed and are mentioned as the main constraints to creativity (Duffy et al., 2009; Edinger, 2008; Harris, 2016). Test-centric instruction creates an environment in which students and teachers are reluctant to try to practice or develop creativity in learning and teaching at any level (Harris & de Bruin, 2019). Also, accountability mandates and pressures to perform well on standardized tests continue to be viewed as competing for teachers' and students' attention, often at the cost of efforts aimed at encouraging creative expression (Berliner, 2011, as cited in Kaufman et al., 2022).

It can be argued that testing limits the flexibility of teachers and decreases the creativity of teachers and students by emphasizing drill-and-kill skill sets-leaving little time for students to explore and discover the world around them, develop critical thinking skills, or become better human beings (Jones et al., 2003). Furthermore, test-driven education stimulates testing meritocracy and unsympathetic competition by emphasizing effort only on test scores (Kim & Chae, 2019). Consequently, it can be said that this test-centric education has had a long-lasting impact on both Iranian EFL teachers' and students' creativity, namely, excessive preparation for the exam hampers students' creativity over several years. Thus, it is unlikely to expect

Iranian EFL teachers to enhance creativity in their classrooms because they are themselves the products of this kind of education.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the creativity-nurturing practices of Iranian EFL teachers. The findings first indicated that the teachers do not frequently adopt creativity-nurturing strategies. Second, school environment, absence of involving procedures, absence of teacher training and collaboration, lack of rapport, and testing and assessment were extracted as the factors influencing creativity-nurturing teaching. Particularly, although teachers are fundamental in nurturing creativity in the classroom, competitive exams such as university entrance exams and other summative tests deviate them to do so (Mullet et al., 2016; Soh, 2000). Exam-focused policies and curricular mandates jeopardize creativity and creative education (Harris & de Bruin, 2019). Generally, it is implied that the presence of performativity in Iranian EFL classrooms creates pressure and dilemma for the teachers to nurture creativity.

Additionally, tangible differences exist between two groups of schools in Iran: high-poverty rural schools including public high schools with populated classrooms and lack of needed facilities, and well-resourced and well-equipped urban high schools. Also, teachers' involvement and training, and cooperation have been ignored in educational policy. Teachers' knowledge and respect as professionals should be considered instead of dictating exactly what and how they should teach. EFL curricula and teacher education programs in Iran have been slow to respond to creativity-nurturing teaching. EFL curriculum in Iran is crowded, that is, many parts have to be taught by the teachers in an insufficient amount of time. The knowledge and the experience of others need to be appreciated in the area of teaching for creativity. Besides, the teachers' weak creativity-nurturing teaching likely reflects their teaching environment and their mindsets and beliefs (Chan & Yuen, 2014). For example, learning English is not a priority in secondary education in Iran, because there are other school subjects, which are more important in passing university exams. Last but not least is teaching time; lack of enough teaching time is the most important aspect that influences language teaching in Iran.

Suggestions and Limitations

This study suggests the need for modification of EFL pre-service and in-service teacher education programs to improve teachers' capacity to nurture creative dispositions and skills in high school students. These programs should prepare teachers with the confidence and skills to foster creative, critical, and innovative thinking practices in their students. EFL teacher educators should be aware of EFL teachers' capabilities and their previous experiences to help them learn to nurture creativity. Changes at the environment and policy levels need to be made to integrate teaching creatively and teaching for creativity into the curriculum, the textbooks, and the classroom. Facilities, resources, and teaching tools should be provided equally for all public high schools across the country. Digital inequality is apparent in rural public high schools in Iran, particularly in teaching English. Teaching time is 1 to 2 hours per week which should be increased to 4 to 5 hours for teachers to have more time to teach English without haste.

The findings of this study have to be seen in light of some limitations which were directly related to a large amount of data, time constraints, and expense. First, other data-gathering procedures, such as observation or teachers' self–reports of teaching activities could be used to enrich the findings. Second, variables such as experience, age, and degree could be taken into account, but it was difficult to collect, analyze and interpret all the related data. Third, because of the above-mentioned reasons, the researchers had to interview forty participants in the qualitative phase. Fourth, due to the coronavirus outbreak, all interviews were conducted via

telephone. It could be better if the interviews were conducted in person, where the researchers could observe the body language and gestures of the participants. Finally, because the data were collected from the four provinces of the country, the findings may not offer sufficient data to apply the results of the study to the whole country.

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Appendix A

Ten activities that might nurture creativity

1. **Brainstorming:** The students are asked to develop different kinds of ideas and thoughts about a topic or task even though they may seem unworkable.

2. **Promoting critical thinking**: When students have ideas, the teacher gets them to explore further before they take a stand or the teacher raises some questions and asks the students to find answers for themselves.

3. **Building self-correction:** The teacher asks the students to check their work several times instead of waiting for him/her to check them.

4. **Creating a new learning environment**: For example, when the weather is fine, the teacher teaches outside. The students work with active and fun activities that they can't do inside**.**

5. **Encouraging collaboration**: The teachers support students to work in groups. The teachers manage classroom activities in ways to encourage students to work together. For example, students cooperate to comprehend reading passages.

6. **Inquiry-based learning:** The teacher provides open-ended challenges and problems.

7. **Using multimedia learning materials:** The teacher works with videos, songs, powerpoints, and podcasts to stimulate students' motivation and interest. Watching a short clip about the lesson can provoke students' interest in learning**.**

8. **Including role plays**: The teacher provides opportunities for the students to take the roles of different people in real-life situations. For example, students can role play the teacher and the students.

9. **Peer correction:** When a student has a question, the teacher asks other students to answer the question. When several answers are given, the teacher asks the whole class to evaluate the answers.

10. **Extension**: The teacher explains a category or an idea and asks the students to tell examples of the category of the idea. For example, wild and farm animals.

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. Are you satisfied with the physical environment, resources, and teaching aids for teaching English?
2. Is there enough time to teach English in class?
3. Do you encourage your students to learn English outside of school?
4. Do you think about your teaching method outside of school?
5. To what extent are your classroom activities student-centered, interaction-oriented, and challenge-based?
6. How is your relationship with the students?
7. Do the students have the freedom to criticize and express their opinions and suggestions?
8. Have you ever participated in English language teaching workshops? What was the topic of the workshop?
9. Have you ever consulted with your colleagues about teaching and classroom management?
10. Have you ever been asked to develop an English curriculum?
11. What methods do you use to assess and ask questions?

12. What roles do tests play in teaching English?