Research Paper

Chinese Teachers' Perceptions of Creativity in the EFL Classroom: Advancing a Culturally Situated Conceptualization of Creativity

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Abstract

This study explores Chinese EFL teachers' perceptions of what characteristics define a creative pupil, beliefs about the malleability and creative competency of students, viewpoints on creativity's relationship to academic subject matter, and assumptions of how creativity is facilitated in the EFL classroom. With the primary aim of contributing to the understanding of creativity as a cultural construct, rather than just a cognitive or social concept, this mixed method research design employed an online questionnaire to include teachers working in different regions and diverse educational contexts in China, as well as interviews to better understand and articulate teachers' viewpoints about creativity in the language classroom. The results of the current study are remarkably inconsistent with the findings of the existing literature that largely support traditional Chinese perceptions and philosophies in relation to creativity, indicating that the concept may be changing in China and/or it may be defined and understood differently in the context of language education. Nonetheless, some traditional perspectives of

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creativity remain, such as its relationship to academic performance and intellectual aptitude. The study holds important implications for highlighting teachers' conceptualizations of creativity and thus helping to illuminate and advance a culturally situated understanding of creativity in the Chinese EFL classroom.
Keywords: Creativity, Culture, Culturally-situated learning, English as a Foreign Language

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1. Introduction

Considering the significant attention to creativity in second language education over the past decade (Jones & Richards, 2015; Maley & Kiss, 2018; Tin, 2022), it could be argued that its importance to teaching and learning is globally recognized; however, the impact of local culture on how creativity is understood, defined, and pedagogically implemented is lacking in the existing literature. Indeed, creativity has been conceptualized as being contextually bound (Lubart, 2010), thus, it can be viewed as a product of human culture as it shapes culture in turn (Shao et al., 2019; Misra et al., 2006). Therefore, if creativity is to be perceived as both a psychological and cultural construct, and if it is to be realized in actual classroom practice, there is a considerable need for more research that explores its meaning through culturally specific norms, conditions, and worldviews. This paper catalyzes this initiative by attempting to clarify, and in some sense specify, the conceptualization of creativity within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in China.

Several studies have examined differences in Eastern and Western perspectives of creativity. In their synthesis paper comparing beliefs about creativity between Chinese and American cultures, Niu and Kaufman (2013)

capture the divergences in three metaphors. To briefly summarize, the first metaphor asserts that the Chinese see creativity as being available to everyone whereas Americans tend to focus more on revolutionary creativity, the type that is distinct to an eminent few. The second metaphor relates to the Chinese belief that creativity evolves throughout one's lifetime as the product of hard work, incessant practice, and the continuous acquisition of knowledge. In juxtaposition, Niu and Kaufman (2013) depict the American impression of creativity as being the result of early inspiration from exposure to some medium of influence, such as music or art, complemented by innate prodigiousness. Finally, the authors contend that in Chinese culture, creativity is appreciated from its roots to its flowers, for the wholeness of the product and its creator and the interconnections that helped it emerge and blossom. In contrast, the American idea of creativity is more internal and individual-focused, and this romanticized portrayal of the creative spirit is celebrated as rebellious, radical, and even reclusive.

In consideration of the perceptual distinctions of creativity in the East Asian context, the current study employs Andiliou and Murphy's (2010) three-factor conceptual framework as well as Jones' (2015) four creative affordances in language to explore one primary research question:

> What are Chinese teachers' conceptualizations of creativity in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom?

Again, while an emphasis on creativity continues to gather momentum in language teaching, there is a critical knowledge gap in articulating the concept in specific cultural contexts. If, indeed, "creativity is bound to culture" as Shao et al. (2019, p. 2) contend, then locating and interpreting it in the Chinese context is essential for defining its key elements and parameters for instruction, curriculum development, assessment design, and educational policy. Through a survey that queries Chinese EFL teachers'

beliefs about English as a creative subject and perceptions of student creativity, along with semi-structured interviews regarding teachers' attitudes toward creativity in the classroom, this study is to explore the cultural nuances of creativity specific to the Chinese EFL context. In examining Chinese EFL teachers' perceptions of the nature of creativity, creative individuals, and creative classroom environment, this study addresses a crucial gap in the literature by situating creativity within a distinct socio-cultural context and lays the groundwork for future studies to discover and validate characteristics of creativity particular to a diverse range of cultural, national, and institutional settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The difference of creativity in Western and Eastern culture

Creativity is, at its root, an element of culture (Shao et al., 2019), with definitions and characteristics being socially and historically constructed, thus, appreciating different cultural perspectives can more appropriately situate research in different educational and professional contexts. The Western view generally refers to North America and Western Europe, while the East encompasses nations located in the Greater Asian region. Although such division is a broad dichotomization and can lead to overgeneralization, it is reasonable to propose that distinct cultural perspectives of creativity are embedded in the different philosophical traditions from which they derive (Niu & Sternberg, 2002). Conceptions of creativity in Western thought originated in the Biblical foundations of God's creation as well as Hellenistic philosophy, and more recently from the spirit of humanism and experimentation arising from the European Renaissance, while Eastern conceptions of creativity emanated from the Chinese philosophy of yin-yang (i.e., the renewing changes of nature) (Niu & Sternberg, 2002; Niu & Sternberg, 2006). Although these different cultural roots of creativity are

well-established and widely recognized, Western paradigms generally hold the dominant status in creativity research globally (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2006). Therefore, to identify teachers' conceptualization of creativity in English language teaching in China, it is necessary to investigate the construct through the lens of Chinese culture.

2.2 Creativity in Chinese culture

The existing literature includes studies that examine implicit theories of creativity which are based on individual belief systems in both the East and West, but representation in comparison with the Eastern context is sparse (Niu & Sternberg, 2002), and empirical research that investigates the concept of creativity from Eastern belief systems has only been undertaken relatively recently. One study conducted by Rudowicz and Yue (2000), in which participants are Chinese undergraduate students, indicates that individuals from Beijing, Guangzhou, Taipei and Hong Kong, all identify "originality", "innovativeness", "thinking and observational skills", "flexibility", "willingness to try", "self-confidence", and "imagination" as core characteristics of creativity. Of note, the traits of "artistic" and "humorous", commonly cited components in the Western conception of creativity, were nearly absent in the participants' description of a creative person (Rudowicz & Yue, 2000).

Another unique element of the Chinese perception of creativity is moral value. Niu and Sternberg (2002) found that Chinese culture is more likely to emphasize the importance of social and moral value regarding individual creativity. This is explained as a consequence of the collectivist orientation of Chinese culture (Chan & Chan, 1999). As suggested by Vahdat et al. (2020) that the local culture cannot be neglected in discussing creativity in language education, it is worth investigating whether these local cultural characteristics influence Chinese EFL teachers' beliefs about creativity.

2.3 Teacher conceptualization of creativity in the Chinese classroom

An important aim in almost every educational system is developing individuals' creativity due to rapid technological changes and innovation, and it is teachers who are tasked with developing students' competence in creativity (Khany & Malekzadeh, 2015). Therefore, it becomes imperative to investigate teachers' conceptualization of creativity. In the context of education, studies have explored teacher beliefs of creativity from different aspects, the first of which is how teachers value characteristics associated with creative learners. In previous research about teachers' impressions of a creative student, traits like imaginative, artistic, and intellectual (Chan & Chan, 1999; Runco & Johnson, 2002) are commonly cited. In addition, another research conducted in Hong Kong by Chan and Chan (1999) shows that the qualities perceived as characteristics of creative students are primarily socially undesirable traits. Hence, previous research appears to indicate that creativity is valued less favorably by Chinese teachers and some teachers may hold negative attitudes toward more creatively inclined students in the classroom.

Another point reflected in Chan and Chan's (1999) study is the association between creative traits nominated by teachers and their concerns of students' academic performance. In their study, except for the previously mentioned commonly used descriptors of creativity, the teachers in Hong Kong also included "quick in responding" and "high intellectual ability" which are associated with general intelligence. The authors believe it may arise from overconcern with students' academic performance. However, in a cross-cultural study, a conspicuous inconsistency among Chinese teachers is that they presume academic performance could indicate students' creativity, which may result from contradictions in the definition of creativity (Zhou et

al., 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to investigate teachers' beliefs on the nature of creativity by considering culture as a reference point.

In previous research, creativity is thought of as originality, and most participants believe creativity is a rare gift (Fryer & Collings, 1991). In addition, in Andiliou and Murphy's (2010) review, creativity is equated with divergent thinking which they define as the cognitive ability to "generate varied, original or unusual ideas in response to open-ended questions or tasks". Indeed, several studies discuss the importance of divergent thinking in language teaching and learning as a means of creative production and problem solving (Ghonsooly & Showqi, 2015; McDonough et al., 2015; Seidinejad & Nafissi, 2018). Another finding is that creativity is believed to be more relevant in some domains (Fryer & Collings, 1991). In Diakidoy and Kanari's (1999) findings, creativity could be easily performed in art and science, and in the study by Zhou et al. (2013), Chinese teachers associate math with a higher possibility for creative performance. In contrast, second language learning and literature are perceived less likely to promote creativity. This may be because math is perceived as requiring complex mental operations (i.e., intellectual ability) which is strongly associated with creativity by Chinese teachers (Chan & Chan, 1999). In comparison, considering their perceived purpose and the methods by which they are taught in China, language and literature are thought to involve extensive memorization and instruction often includes a focus on exam preparation, making these subjects seem antithetical to the nature of creativity (Zhou et al., 2013). However, a recent study by Greenier et al. (2023) found that Chinese EFL teachers are placing greater emphasis on creativity, both in their approach to teaching and in regard to student learning, through more formative assessment (FA) practices, seeing FA as a means to expand student thinking about language and culture.

Regarding teachers' beliefs about factors that cultivate and hinder creativity in classroom, Chinese teachers believe promoting students' critical thinking ability is the most effective way to foster creativity, as well as giving students detailed feedback and offering opportunities for discovery to enhance critical thinking (Zhou et, al., 2013). In addition, providing rewards is given as the second most important factor as it increases learners' motivation for participating in the learning process. The primary deterring factor found in Zhou et al.'s study (2013) is pressure from the evaluation system which restricts Chinese teachers in their pedagogical approach.

2.4 Creativity in language teaching

Creativity has a significant role in language education. Supporting this claim, recent research by Shahisavandi (2023) in the Iranian context provides evidence for the positive effect of creativity on EFL students' willingness to communicate (WTC), particularly regarding productive skills (i.e., speaking and writing) and thus the author asserts that creativity is crucial in language education. In addition, previous study showed that students' performance is related to teachers' level of creativity (Baghaei & Riasati, 2013) and the authors suggests that containing creative techniques into language teaching practice can improve students' academic achievement. For teachers, Derakhshan et al. (2023) confirms in a cross-cultural study that there is a significant and positive relationship between teacher work engagement and teaching for creativity in the context of English language education. Therefore, for both teachers and students, creativity is necessary rather than optional in language education.

As language teaching approaches have developed over time, researchers and teachers have increasingly acknowledged the primary objective of teaching a language is to help learners achieve communicative competence which is also the main aim of most language learners (Hummel, 2013; Baran-

Łucarz, 2014), placing more emphasis on authentic interaction. Indeed, Porter et al. (2022) problematize highly structured approaches to language education and call for more, richer, and deeper opportunities to engage communicatively and creatively with the target language and for learners to become more motivated by and emotionally invested with the target language and its cultural artefacts. This instructional philosophy coheres with the four creative affordances of language proposed by Jones (2015, p. 20); creativity is:

1. rule-governed (the ability to think inside of the box)
2. ambiguous (the ability to understand language in its given context)
3. situated (the ability to adapt language according to different situations)
4. dialogic (the ability to respond to others)

The first affordance is rule-governed. Although seemingly inimical to commonly cited creative characteristics such as novelty and unconventionality, rules (i.e., language conventions) facilitate language by reconceptualizing linguistic constraints as affordances that allow for variability in language use, providing a range of prefabricated chunks of meaningful expression while permitting infinite inventiveness in every utterance (Jones, 2015). Ambiguity means that although the lack of precision in language appears problematic, it enables speakers to include different communicative goals in one expression (Jones, 2015). The third affordance for creativity is that it is situated, which posits that meaning depends not only on the words but also on the context, tone, and intentions of the producer; essentially, communication involves processing meaning within social contexts. The last affordance for creativity, dialogic, entails the unpredictability of conversation, which Jones (2015) believes is the major source of new ideas and actions. In this view, creativity is not a choice but at the heart of successful language teaching and learning.

Different cultures possess a different understanding of these affordances, therefore, identifying teachers' attitudes toward the affordances in a specific culture contributes to better appreciating how teachers promote creativity in language teaching. Thus, it is important to explore how EFL teachers in China perceive the four creative affordances of language.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design

This study employs Andiliou and Murphy's (2010) theoretical framework, comprising teachers' beliefs about the nature of creativity, beliefs about creative students, and environmental factors that contribute to developing creativity. In addition, the four affordances proposed by Jones (2015) —rule governed, ambiguous, situated, and dialogic —underpin the investigation of teachers' attitudes towards the creative affordances in language teaching.

This study uses a mixed method research design to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese EFL teachers' conceptions of creativity, afford different avenues for exploration, and provide triangulation to put forth a more nuanced interpretation of the data through multiple perspectives (Dornyei, 2007). For quantitative data collection, a questionnaire consisting of 12 items (Appendix 1) was distributed amongst English language teachers in China. The questionnaire was modified and developed from two studies on teachers' conceptualization of creativity, using items from each that were relevant to the current study. The first study was conducted by Diakidoy and Kanari (1999) on student teachers in Cyprus, and the second, by Wang and Kokotsaki (2018), focused on primary school English teachers in China through open-ended written prompts. To ensure the questionnaire items were clear, concise, germane to the research question, and could be adequately interpreted in data analysis., a face validity

examination was employed by asking three scholars with significant knowledge of the construct of creativity in language teaching to provide feedback on the questionnaire. After two rounds of minor revisions, the experts confirmed the appropriateness of the questionnaire for the research objectives.

The end of the questionnaire provided the contact details of the principal investigator and requested volunteers for interviews. The interview protocol (Appendix B) was also adapted from Wang and Kokotsaki's (2018) research. Interview participants were asked to provide an example of an English lesson in which the learners were creative in English and explain why they think so. They were also asked to provide an explanation of how they regard creativity in the subject of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and the strategies they use to promote creative learning in the classroom. In addition, their perception of students' creativity in English as well as the relationship between English proficiency were explored.

3.2 Participants

Data collection began with convenience sampling by posting the questionnaire on several social media platforms in China. This evolved into referral sampling with survey participants sharing the online link to the questionnaire on their social media profiles and in teaching groups. After three months, 330 questionnaires were submitted, and following a data cleansing process that removed incomplete, hastily completed, and inconsistent responses, a total of 274 complete responses were analyzed. All survey participants were Chinese nationals who spoke Chinese as their first language. Convenience and referral sampling were the most suitable in this research because they allowed the researchers to include participants who wanted their voices heard on the matter of creativity in language teaching, attracted participants working in diverse institutional contexts with different

perspectives and varying educational levels, and allowed for quick dissemination of the questionnaire as well as further qualitative examination through follow-up interviews.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the demographic diversity within the sample, providing fruitful information in response to the research question which aimed to understand the views of EFL teachers working throughout the country and in diverse institutional contexts and with students of varying age and proficiency levels.
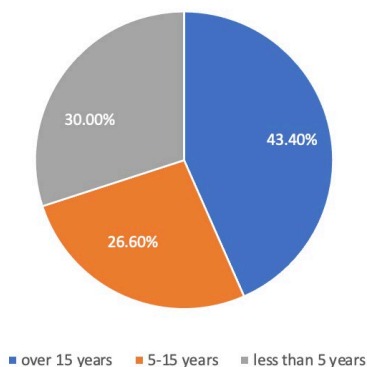

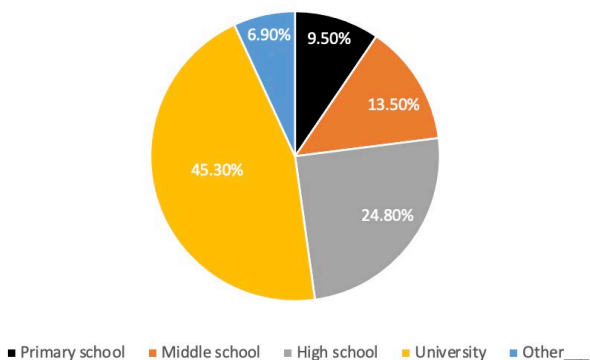*Figure 1.* Years of teaching

Figure 2. Institution type

Table 1 shows the information of the six teachers who volunteered for the follow up interview (all names are pseudonyms).

Table 1

Interviewees

Name	Years of teaching	Degree level / Location	Institution type
Ang	5	Master's / China	University
Qian	10	Bachelor's / China	Primary school
Chen	2	Master's / UK	Middle school
Yu	3	Master's / UK	High school
Xue	11	Bachelor's / China	Primary school
Zhang	2	Master's / China	Primary school

Three teachers are regarded as early career educators with under five years of teaching experience, one interviewee is considered mid-career with five years of teaching experience, while two are viewed as senior teachers, with 10 or more years as EFL professionals. The interview participants work at different educational levels, with three employed at primary schools, one teaching in a middle school, one at a high school, and another instructing university EFL courses. Qian and Xue, who have the most professional experience, possess a bachelor's degree while the early and mid-career teachers have all obtained master's degrees. The interviews followed the collection of the questionnaire data and were all conducted in Chinese.

For the sake of clarity, participants that only completed the questionnaire will hereafter be referred to as *survey participants* and individuals who participated in interviews will be referred to as *interview participants*.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

3.3.1 Questionnaire

Following Andiliou and Murphy's model (2010), the questionnaire investigates teachers' conceptualization from three aspects: the nature of

creativity, creative individuals, and creative classroom environment. The first part of the questionnaire is teachers' beliefs about the nature of creativity, in which five factors are taken into consideration: distribution (whether teachers perceive creativity as a potential for everyone or only for some particular individuals); plasticity (whether teachers believe creativity can increase or decrease during an individuals' lifetime); specificity (how teachers perceive creativity to be manifested in different subjects compared with English); academic achievement (whether teachers relate creativity with academic achievement); and language creativity (whether teachers find creativity related to the characteristics of language). Four dimensions of the questionnaire are adapted from Diakidoy and Kanari's (1999) instrument and the *specificity* element is taken from Wang and Kokotsaki's (2018) questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire contains nine questions. Four are to test teachers' opinions on distribution and plasticity of creativity in which survey participants need to indicate their agreement and disagreement with the statements, and there is one Yes/No question which requires survey participants to provide explanations for their choices. As for specificity, beyond indicating their opinions, survey participants must compare different subjects with English. Another two questions include statements about the relationship between academic achievement and creativity as well as whether survey participants feel social and moral value are related to individual creativity. Finally, the last question is related to language creativity, which includes four statements about characteristics of language creativity taken from Jones' (2015) study, and survey participants are asked to select the options they think relates to creativity and provide a reason.

The second part of the questionnaire is teachers' perception of creative individuals, which is adapted from Diakidoy and Kanari's (1999) instrument

that had survey participants select traits they think are necessary for a person to be creative. Some traits, such as divergent thinking, are indicated in Torrance's work (cited by Diakidoy & Kanari, 1999). The present study adds Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) characteristics of creative individuals to present additional choices.

The questionnaire also presents two EFL classroom activities (Stepanek, 2015; Hadfield & Hadfield, 2016). In the first activity, the questionnaire explains that students should work individually and think critically to choose listening materials. In the second activity, students brainstorm about what the object might have done during the day. Survey participants were instructed to select the creative characteristics and abilities they think could be elicited for each of the activities.

The last part of the questionnaire investigates how teachers perceive environmental factors for cultivating creativity in the EFL classroom. Based on the work of Maley and Kiss (2017), there are fourteen choices offered for factors that can help achieve a creative classroom climate and survey participants are asked to choose those they believe relate to a creative classroom.

3.3.2 Interviews

Interviews took place through WeChat, an online social messaging platform that is convenient for interviewing in China. The interviews, which focused on perceptions of creativity in English teaching and strategies used to promote creativity in the EFL context, were audio-recorded and stored by the researcher on a password-protected computer. Interviewee participated in one semi-structured interview which were, on average, approximately 20 minutes in duration. All recordings were first anonymized and transcribed before beginning the coding procedure.

3.4 Data analysis

The questionnaire was used to generate a general portrait of Chinese EFL teachers' perceptions of creativity in the EFL classroom through descriptive statistics. Percentages are reported and presented through the data visualization of pie charts and bar graphs to better illustrate the salient results from the questionnaire and to provide data triangulation with the interview findings.

The interview questions were in line with Andiliou and Murphy's (2010) framework and investigated whether the interview participants recognized Jones' (2015) affordances of language. Hence, an abductive coding approach was applied, inductively applying our own codes first, then deductively combining and renaming codes, where appropriate, to align with Andiliou and Murphy's (2010) and Jones' (2015) terminology. The similarities and diversity in teachers' conceptions were carefully considered and analyzed independently by each researcher in the first instance. The initial codes formulated by each researcher were compared and amalgamated, renaming categories where necessary in an iterative process of *values coding* (Saldaña, 2015), which focused on interview participants' values, attitudes, beliefs, and philosophies about creativity in language teaching in China.

Commonalities and differences in the interviews were carefully examined throughout the coding process and were brought into focus in the final process of "themeing the data" (Saldaña, 2015, p. 175), which is the outcome of coding, categorizing, and reflecting on the data analysis. From this discovery process, the emergent, contextually situated themes, again premised on the framework of Andiliou and Murphy (2010) and the affordances for creativity in language teaching and learning offered by Jones (2015), were devised and evidenced by the results of the questionnaire and quotes by the interview participants.

4. Results

4.1 Questionnaire results

The first aspect of the nature of creativity is teachers' beliefs about the distribution of creativity. Based on responses to Questions 1 and 2, the survey participants appear to believe that all people can be creative, but the extent of creative potential is different for everyone. Almost half of the survey participants (45.6%) agreed that creativity belongs to all students but 93.1% agreed that some children are more creative than others (Figures 3 & 4).
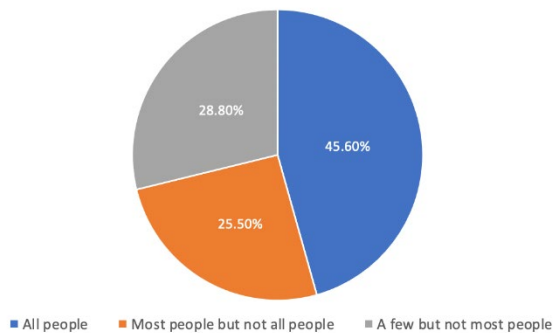

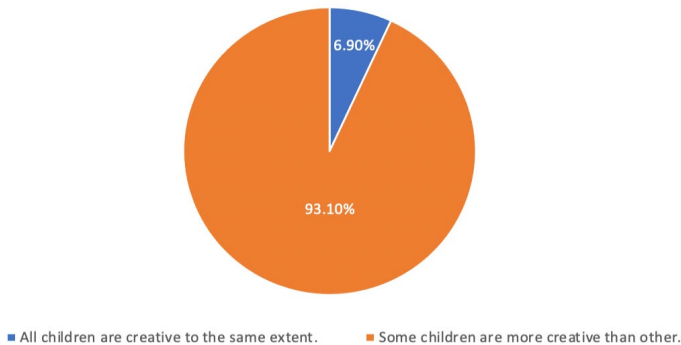*Figure 3.* Teachers' views of whether creativity is a characteristic of all people

Figure 4. Teachers' views of children's creativity extent

The second group of questions queries teachers' beliefs on the plasticity of creativity, referring to whether teachers regard creativity as a cultivable

ability (Andiliou & Murphy, 2010). The results show nearly all survey participants agree that teachers could help facilitate students' creativity with only one respondent declaring that creativity is innate (Figure 5). In addition, when they were asked to provide strategies they can use, the most frequently mentioned is *eliciting*, believing that asking questions could evoke the creativity of students. Also mentioned by survey participants were encouraging students, designing creative classroom activities, realizing the individuality of students, reducing pressure, asking open-ended questions, giving more space to students, designing project-based learning activities, creating real situations, cultivating interests, and providing visual stimulation.
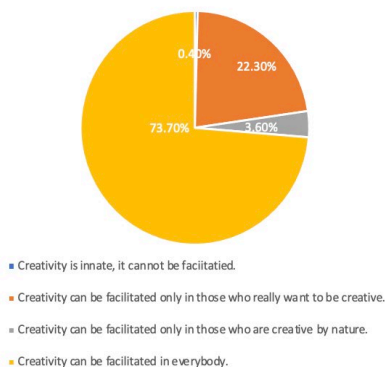

0.40%   22.30%   3.60%   73.70%

- Creativity is innate, it cannot be faciitatied.
- Creativity can be facilitated only in those who really want to be creative.
- Creativity can be facilitated only in those who are creative by nature.
- Creativity can be facilitated in everybody.

Figure 5. Teachers' views of the facilitation of creativity

The third aspect of the nature of creativity, specificity, relates to how teachers perceive the degree to which creativity is manifested in various fields. Results demonstrate that survey participants have different views regarding which academic subjects are most likely to embody creativity, with no subject being dominant (other than "None") (Figures 6 & 7); however, results of the next question reveal that most survey participants believe arts-

related subjects provide more opportunities for students to exhibit creative thinking and behavior (Figure 8).
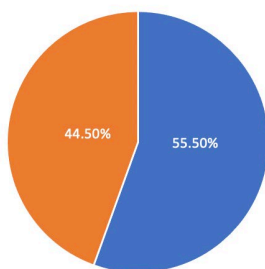
■ Creative children manifest their creativity in a specific domain and in a particular way.
■ Creative children manifest their creativity in a variety of domains and in a variety of ways.

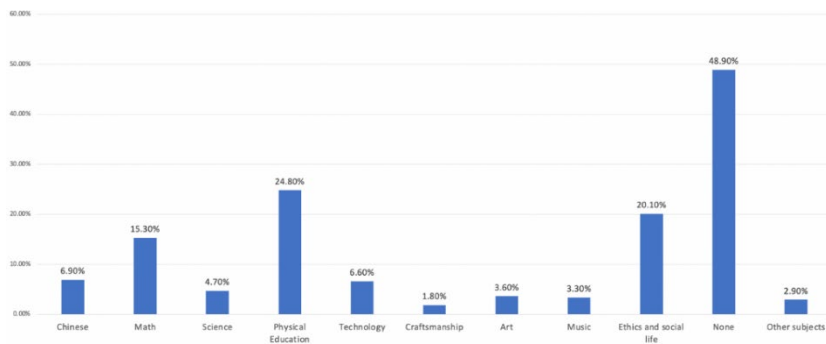*Figure 6.* Teachers' views of children's manifestation of creativity in different academic subjects

Figure 7. Teachers' views of subjects that offer less opportunities for creativity than English
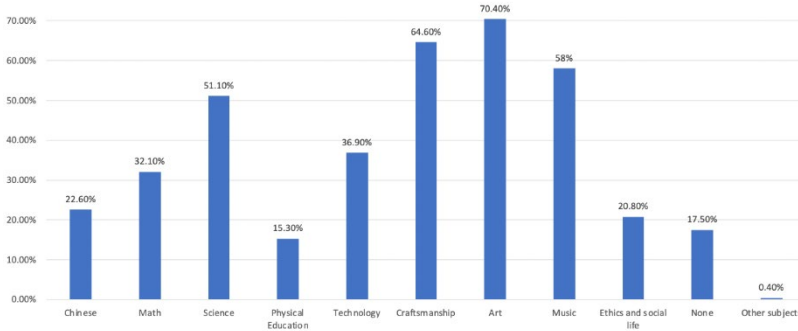
Chinese Teachers' Perceptions …

Figure 8. Teachers' views of subjects that offer more opportunities for creativity than English

The next section considers how teachers perceive the relationship between academic achievement and creativity. The data indicates that nearly half of the survey participants are uncertain about such a relationship (Figure 9). In addition, only 10.6% of survey participants agreed with the statement that good students are more likely to be creative than average students, and approximately half of the survey participants objected to this statement (Figure 10).
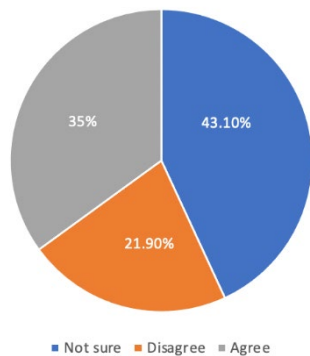
Figure 9. Teachers' views of academic achievement is a relatively good index of creativity
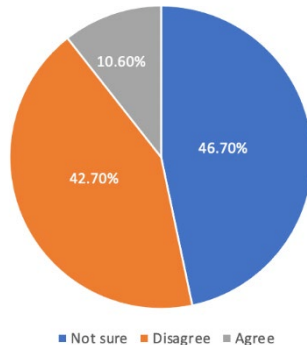

Figure 10. Teachers' views of good students are more likely to be creative than average students

The last section of the nature of creativity is about how English teachers perceive the relationship between language and creativity. Language is situated is the most popular option with the most cited reason being that conversation in different situations has different understandings and creativity is easily promoted within a situated context. Language is dialogic is the second most chosen option as 65.7% of survey participants think it is related to creativity because conversation depends on how people create it. On the other hand, 40% of survey participants agree that the ambiguous feature of language is related to creativity because it results in different understandings of the same language (i.e., sometimes language can be unexpected, figurative, humorous, or intentionally vague) and it provides the possibility of people creating different meaning (Figure 11). The rule-governed nature of language is selected by only a fifth of survey participants. They maintain that people can create novel language under rules, and some

instances of language use do not follow grammar rules. However, some survey participants do not relate the rule-governed aspect of language to creativity, stating that the constraints of grammar stifle creativity.
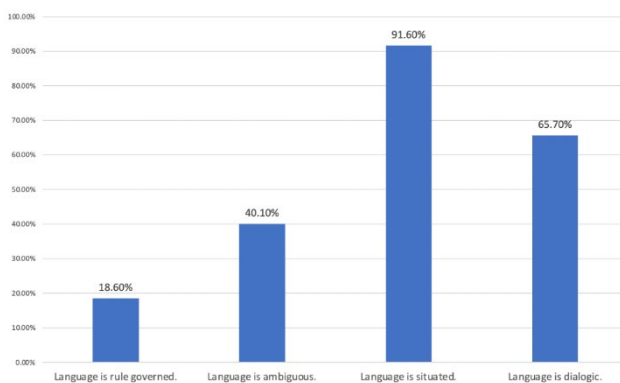

Figure 11. Teachers' views of language creativity

Question 10, which seeks to understand how teachers perceive creative students, presents 34 characteristics and abilities related to creativity and asks survey participants to select all those they believe relate to a learner's creative ability. Figure 12 illustrates that imagination is the most frequently chosen characteristic. Divergent thinking, self-confidence, problem finding ability, intrinsic motivation, having many interests, autonomy, analytical, critical thinking, and energetic are all thought to be necessary for creativity by over a half of survey participants. In contrast, less than 10 survey participants perceive arrogance, ignorance, fear of failure, and need to avoid mistakes as characteristics of creative students. In addition, traits such as self-doubt, naivety, respect for tradition, intuitive, humble, and extrinsic motivation are rarely identified as being elements of a creative personality (Figure 12).
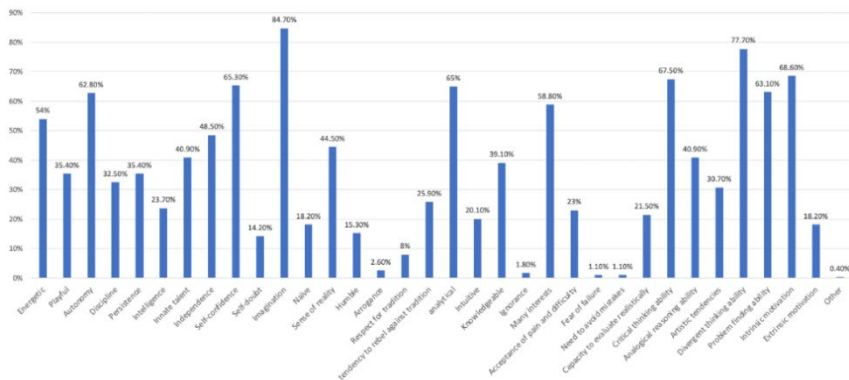
Figure 12. Teacher perception of the characteristics of creative students

The next sub-section of the questionnaire provided two classroom activities (specific to language teaching) describing what learners need to do; survey participants were asked to check the learner characteristics they think could be elicited through the activity. The first activity is a grammar-focused task which aims to show that students can work autonomously in topics of individual interest, think critically, and make decisions about the materials they prefer to use (Stepanek, 2015). Based on survey participants' opinions, autonomy and analytical have been identified by over half of survey participants who regard them as the primary characteristics that can be stimulated in this activity. Self-doubt, respect for tradition, ignorance, and need to avoid mistakes are also identified as characteristics that are activated but only by a small number of survey participants (Figure 13).
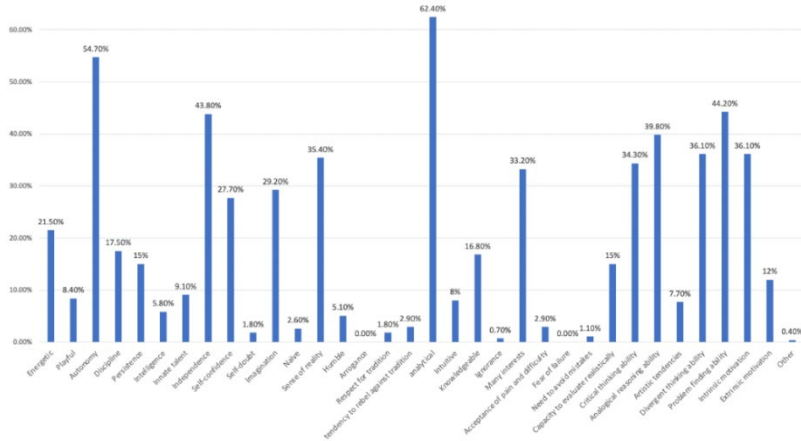
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Figure 13. Teacher perception of the characteristics of creative students in the first activity

The second activity is called *My day so far* which is chosen from Hadfield and Hadfield's (2016, p. 55) teaching grammar creatively. This activity uses constraints, imaginative triggers, and audience within which creativity thrives. The results show the survey participants believe that the most likely characteristics to be evoked from this activity are imagination and divergent thinking. In contrast, several characteristics such as self-doubt, arrogance, ignorance, fear of failure, and need to avoid mistakes were selected by less than 10 survey participants (Figure 14).
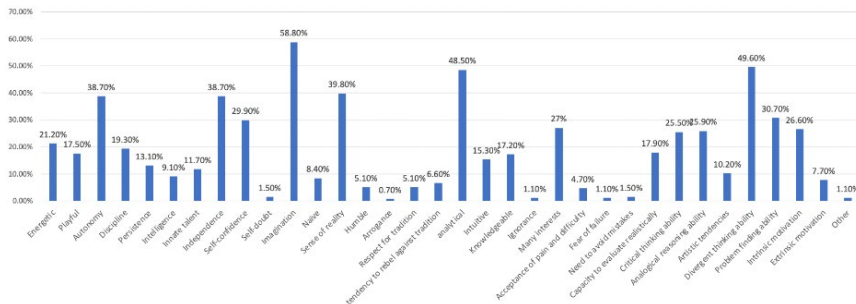
Figure 14. Teacher perception of the characteristics of creative students in the second activity

The last part of the questionnaire was designed to understand how teachers perceive environmental factors in the EFL classroom for cultivating students' creativity. Most survey participants (84.7%) agree that using creative input such as art, music and song, literature, drama, and film, and encouraging curiosity and noticing contribute to the creative environment. A relaxed, non-judgmental atmosphere, acknowledge the individuality of students, and using a variety of inputs, processes, and products are also regarded as important environmental factors for creative engagement. In contrast, only 18.2% of the teachers agree that framing activities with constraints can cultivate creativity (Figure 15).
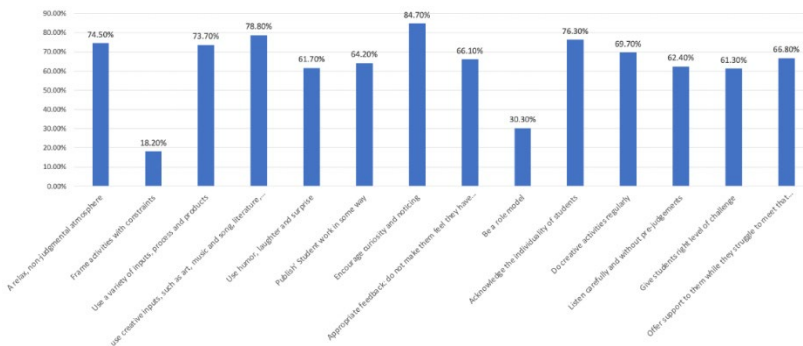

Figure 15. Teacher perception of environmental factors for cultivating creativity

4.2 Interview findings

The interviews aimed to explore in greater detail how interview participants conceive of creativity in English language teaching, as well as what strategies they can use to facilitate creative learning.

The interview participants expressed different perspectives about whether English was a creative subject. Ang et al. affirmed that English was a creative subject because of the nature of language but provided different reasons. Ang, Xue, and Zhang thought that language itself is creative. Ang believed any subject related to language was creative. Xue and Zhang held a similar belief, asserting that language was a creative in a process-oriented sense because it was in a constant state of development and change. Yu stated that by learning English students can broaden their knowledge, essentially meaning that an additional language can be a resource for creative thinking. Thus, although they all agreed that English was a creative subject, Ang et al. focused on the communicative aspect, while Yu related creativity to the knowledge brought about by learning English. In contrast, Qian and Chen did not consider English to be a creative academic subject. Qian thought of English as an instrument for communication having no relationship with creativity, but she conceded that it is possible to include creativity and innovation as a component of instruction. Chen focused on the instructional and personal factors that can manifest creativity in the classroom.

Regarding the strategies interview participants employed to facilitate creative learning, four mentioned designing classroom activities, albeit with different justifications. Qian and Xue's reason emphasized that students should do something different, such as brainstorming, to provide students enough time for thinking, while Chen and Yu focused on using English. The second strategy was using language in real life. Chen asked her students to use English when greeting her and, if possible, to practice communicating with their parents in English. The third strategy was changing the classroom environment, such as rearranging tables and desks. Qian insisted this could get students more involved in activities such as role play. The last strategy focused on the input materials. This was mentioned by Ang and Zhang when

asserting their preference for visual aids such as paintings and videos to facilitate creative learning.

To uncover how the interview participants regarded creativity in classroom interaction, the next question asked for a sample lesson in which learners demonstrated their creativity in English. Ang regarded the combination of two different things together as creative behavior and emphasized the importance of limitations (i.e., constraints). In the activity, students had to design a creative lesson within a limited time. Qian regarded students' transfer ability and the characteristic of risk-taking as the performance of creativity. She gave an example of vocabulary learning where students must apply the phonics they just learned and try to pronounce new vocabulary items.

Both Chen and Zhang emphasized creativity as creating new things based on existing things. The activity given by Chen was about adapting or imitating existing music videos or movie clips. From Chen's description, humor was also perceived as a creative behavior. The example provided by Zhang was when students were learning "a glass of water", they also thought about how to express "a bowl of noodles." The last example given by Yu was a brainstorming task which was also mentioned by Xue. Yu believed students' divergent thinking can be stimulated by brainstorming prior to a writing exercise, and Xue stated brainstorming gave students enough space to come up with new ideas.

Question 6 examined if creativity was perceived as an innate capacity by asking interview participants if they believe some students are naturally more creative in English learning. Interview participants were unanimous in agreeing that some students were naturally more creative in English; however, Qian, Zhang, and Chen said that the innate creativity in English had very little influence on their language ability. Qian and Chen insisted that the

role of teachers and parents was more important than students' innate creativity although some students were naturally more creative in English than others. Although Zhang held a similar opinion, she had quite different reasons. She thought good English ability can be mastered by doing a lot of grammar practices so it cannot be related to creativity. In direct contrast to Qian, Zhang, and Chen, Yu believed innate English creativity is related to language ability. She believed students who were generally more talented in language had better English creativity.

The next question focused on the interview participants' views on the relationship between English proficiency and English creativity. Chen insisted that there was no relationship between them. The creative person might not have been well behaved when they were young so they might not have performed well in academics. From this perspective, interview participants related English proficiency to working hard and being an exemplary pupil. A conflicting point of view was expressed by Xue who believed it depended on the type of questions because different types of questions can reflect students' creativity in different ways.

After discussing the interview participants' perspectives of creativity in the EFL classroom, they were then asked to describe what was meant by "creativity" in English usage. Four interview participants mentioned language output. Yu thought creativity in English was using linguistic knowledge in practice, and Ang described creativity specifically in writing, applying the word "nozzle" as a metaphor for constraints which could shape linguistic output. Chen also emphasized output, but she focused on the flexible use of language. Zhang emphasized output also, but stressed that expressing new things meant using existing knowledge. Divergent thinking and flexibility were regarded as characteristics of creativity by Chen. Only Qian focused on the input of English. She defined creativity in English as

how fast students could learn. One interviewee, Xue, considered the question in terms of language itself, asserting that language is creative and in a perpetual creative process because it is ever-expanding with new vocabulary, expressions, idioms, and slang. The interviews demonstrated different notions of whether English was creative as an academic subject, but all generally agreed that it was important to teach for creativity in English.

5. Discussion

5.1 Teachers' beliefs about creativity

The majority of survey participants believe creativity to be a characteristic of most people, but 93% expressed their view that people's creative ability is different by nature. Nonetheless, learner creativity was perceived as a malleable ability that could be developed by teachers. In addition, questionnaire responses appear to indicate that teachers have their own ways to foster students' creativity, although eliciting, encouraging, and designing creative classroom activities are the predominant methods reported. Consistent with Zhou et al.'s (2013) study in which creativity is perceived to have a degree of plasticity, most survey participants agreed that teachers can promote creativity, but some do not believe creativity can be facilitated in all students.

It appears that survey participants recognize the important role of teachers during the facilitating process, because whether creativity can be fomented in students depends on how teachers encourage it and whether these strategies are suitable for students, yet it is somewhat paradoxical that they also believe some students lack the general aptitude to demonstrate creativity in the EFL context. Further, the result of the current study shows that 43.1% survey participants expressed reservations about the relationship between creativity and academic achievement, which differs from Zhou et al.'s (2013) findings where participants held clear views about this relationship. Zhou et al. (2013)

also found that participants believed academic performance is a strong indicator of the creativity of students, which is also supported by Chan and Chan (1999). One possibility is that the survey participants are uncertain about the relevance of academic achievement to creativity, but a third of survey participants in the current study agree that academic achievement is a relatively good index of creativity.

In terms of the specificity of creativity, the result shows that survey participants generally agree that creative learners are more likely to manifest their creativity in a specific domain rather than in a variety of domains and assert that opportunities (i.e., affordances) for creative thought vary according to different academic subjects. Part of the results of the present study concur with Wang and Kokotsaki's (2018) data that found art (drawing and painting) to be overwhelmingly associated with more creativity than English, and with the findings of Diakidoy and Kanari's (1999) study in which participants affirm that creativity could be more easily performed in art and science. The present study shows that music and craftsmanship are perceived to be more creative than English (as an academic subject) by most of the survey participants, whereas in Wang and Kokotsaki's (2018) study, music is perceived to be less creative than English. Most survey participants in the present study reported that math, technology, and science provide more opportunities for creativity than English, an assertion that is consistent with the findings of Zhou et, al. (2013), confirming that Chinese teachers associate math with a higher possibility of creative performance. Of significance in the present study is that English is perceived as the subject that provides the least opportunity for creativity except for physical education. A possible explanation for this is that math demands complex intellectual operations which is thought to relate to creativity among Chinese teachers (Chan & Chan, 1999), while English education, as a result of the pervasive educational

paradigm in China that teaches the subject through didactive instruction, is believed to predominantly involve structured practice and rote memorization and is thus seen as counterintuitive to the nature of creativity (Zhou et, al., 2013).

The final dimension of creativity in this study is teachers' perception of language creativity. Again, Jones' (2015) four affordances of language which make it an effective tool for creativity are rule governed, ambiguous, situated, and dialogic. Results of the current study imply that situated and dialogic affordances are perceived to be related to creativity, with survey participants emphasizing the function of context. This is supported by Jones' (2015) assertion that being creative with language is about creating context-bound combinations which are not only appropriate but also effective. In addition, the uncertainty of conversation, that is, its highly variable nature, is also mentioned by survey participants, which is akin to the condition of unpredictability proposed by Jones. The importance of ambiguity is also identified by some survey participants who emphasize different people have different understandings of the same language. This is also supported by Jones' opinion that even when people think they are clear, the listeners still must draw inferences from what has been said. The importance of *rule-governed* for language creativity is not acknowledged by most survey participants. Survey participants who supported it state creativity can be stimulated under *restrictions* (i.e., constraints), however survey participants who objected to it maintained that the constraints of grammar stifle creativity. It is possible that this is because some teachers associate the idea of 'rules' with the academic study of the formal elements of English (i.e., grammar), which they perceive as restricting creativity given the teacher-centered, exam-oriented focus of the subject in China. Although the survey participants may not quite understand the relationship between language and creativity,

the interview results indicate the interview participants do believe it is important to teach for creativity in English language education.

5.2 Teachers' perception of creative students

Two widely agreed upon creative traits in this study are imagination and divergent thinking. The recognition of imagination as a key creative competency is in line with the findings of Runco and Johnson (2002). However, intelligence, identified as important for creative aptitude in other studies (e.g., Chan & Chan, 1999) is perceived to be necessary according to only a few teachers in this study. Further, half of the interview participants affirmed that they do not believe English proficiency to be important for creative engagement, which corroborates the results of the questionnaire. It was found that teachers do not tend to relate creativity with tradition or failure as the response rates were low for characteristics such as *respect for tradition*, *tendency to rebel against tradition*, *acceptance of pain and difficulty*, *fear of failure*, and *need to avoid mistakes*. The reason is possibly because creativity in the East is not essentially related to individual characteristics as suggested in Niu and Sternberg's (2002) study. Additionally, the lack of acknowledement for characteristics related to tradition is in conflict with the concept of creativity in Yin and Yang philosophy which emphasizes making a connection between the new and the old (Niu & Sternberg, 2002), potentially suggesting that contemporary conceptions of creativity in China are changing, or, conceivably, that creativity has a different implication in the context of language teaching and learning. Another notable result is that humor, which is generally absent from depictions of a creative person in the Chinese context (Rudowicz & Yue, 2000), was perceived as a creative behavior in language learning by two interview participants.

From the two EFL sample activities evaluated by survey participants, most of the characteristics related to creativity in the classroom were identified. In the first classroom activity, the commonly chosen traits of *autonomy*, *independence*, *intrinsic motivation*, *divergent thinking*, *problem finding ability*, *analogical reasoning ability* and *analytical* are reflected in the process of searching the internet for similar examples of a grammatical feature which they received from the instruction (Stepanek, 2015). In the second classroom activity, which requires students to think of all the things that an object might have done in one day, characteristics such as *imagination*, *divergent thinking*, *analytical*, and *sense of reality* are commonly cited by the survey participants. Analytical and divergent thinking are the two most selected traits for both example activities; this likely reflects the strong association survey participants draw between analytical skills, divergent thinking, and creativity.

5.3 Teachers' perception of environmental factors for cultivating creativity

The majority of survey participants identify encouraging curiosity and noticing as key factors for cultivating a creative learning environment which supports Zhou et al.'s (2013) findings that offering students discovery opportunities are important for improving students' critical thinking ability. The importance of creative classroom activities and using a variety of inputs is also saliently identified by survey participants and reflected in the follow-up interviews.

Four interview participants affirmed that they prefer to use activities which provide students opportunities to activate both English and their creativity skills. Another finding from the questionnaire data that coincided with the follow-up interviews is that survey participants identify using a variety of inputs as a means for promoting students' creativity. However, the

importance of constraints, which plays a scaffolding role for students in cultivating creativity (Maley and Kiss, 2017), is seemingly not valued by survey participants. Results indicate that language creativity, like the rule-governed feature, is not recognized by most survey participants (18.6%). Rules set boundaries in language use and without them languages would become incomprehensible, so they have a similar impact as the role of constraints in cultivating creativity. Therefore, survey participants, perceiving constraints and "rule-governed" as antithetical to creativity (Jones, 2015), may have failed to recognize their potential in cultivating creative thinking. From the findings, most of the factors for nurturing creativity in the classroom are identified by questionnaire results. This means that although survey participants have different opinions on whether they regard English as a creative subject, they recognize strategies exist for engaging and enriching students' creative thinking.

6. Conclusion

The Chinese EFL teachers in this study believe creativity belongs to most people and can be developed and that teachers play an important role in this process. Although they feel creativity can be manifested in a specific domain, English teachers tend to believe English provides less opportunities for creativity compared with subjects such as art, math, and science. In addition, they do not quite understand the relationship between language and creativity. As for EFL teachers' perception of creative students, it is noteworthy that survey participants selected traits more associated with Western conceptions of creative behavior and seem not to associate students' attitudes toward tradition and failure with the characteristics of creativity; this departure suggests that modern conceptions of creativity in China may be different from traditional ways of thinking.

In terms of identifying the environmental factors in cultivating creativity, Chinese EFL teachers identify classroom-level features that seemingly capture a cross-cultural conceptualization, again suggesting that traditionally Eastern philosophical views have been influenced by or intuitively coalesced with characteristics more aligned with the Western literature on creative learning. In general, Chinese teachers believe creativity is a characteristic of most people, can be developed, and that teachers play an important role in this process, all of which align with Eastern philosophical views (Niu & Kaufman, 2013). It also demonstrates their belief that creativity is less individually focused which differs from Western perceptions (Niu & Kaufman, 2013). Thus, although some traditionally Eastern oriented aspects of creativity have waned or been otherwise assimilated with a typically more Western perspective, the findings do imply that cultural differences in the conception of creativity still exist. Thus, there is a need to understand and appreciate these distinctions in the EFL context and to develop a culturally relevant conceptualization that will value Eastern perceptions of creativity in both theory and practice.

This study aimed to contribute to the exploration of how Chinese in-service teachers perceive creativity in the EFL classroom and how cultural understanding of the concept impact classroom-related decisions. Although beyond the scope of this study, frameworks for teaching for creativity in China should be further investigated at different educational levels, identifying dimensions of creativity that seem to overlap with Western ideas of the construct and, perhaps more critically, illuminating culturally distinct characteristics that will afford more ownership to Chinese teachers and learners of English in their creative pursuits.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Questionnaire:

Part 1: Biographical information
1. Age:
2. Teaching Experience:
How long have you been teaching English as a second language: _____ year(s).
3. Teaching grade:

Part 2 (Nature of creativity: distribution, plasticity, specificity, context (academic achievement and language creativity)):
1. Creativity is a characteristic of _____.
All people
Most people but not all people
A few but not most people

2. Please indicate which of the following do you agree:
All children are creative to the same extent.
Some children are more creative than other.

3. Can a teacher facilitate creativity in pupils?
Yes
No
If yes, in what way?
If no, why not?

4. Please indicate which of the following do you agree:
Creativity can be facilitated in everybody.
Creativity can be facilitated only in those who are creative by nature.
Creativity is innate; it cannot be facilitated.

5. Please indicate which of the following do you agree:
Creative children manifest their creativity in a specific domain and in a particular way.
Creative children manifest their creativity in a variety of domains and in a variety of ways.

6.

Which subjects offer more opportunities for creative thought than English? (Select from this list and tick)

Chinese	Maths	Science	PE
Technology	Craftsmanship	Art	Music
Ethics and social life (including history, geography and politics)		Any other subject? (Please specify)	

7. Which subjects offer *fewer* opportunities for creative thought than English? (Select from this list and tick)

Chinese	Maths	Science	PE
Technology	Craftsmanship	Art	Music
Ethics and social life (including history, geography and politics)		Any other subject? (Please specify)	

8. Academic achievement is a relatively good index of creativity.

Agree

Disagree

Not sure

9. Good students are more likely to be creative than average students.

Agree

Disagree

Not sure

10. The followings are the characteristics of language, which ones do you think related to creativity and please give your reason.

Language is rule governed.

Language is ambiguous.

Language is situated.

Language is dialogic.

Part 2: (Creative students)

11. (According to Csikszentmihalyi's Characteristics of Creative Individuals, Boden, Amabile)

Which of the following characteristics and abilities do you think are necessary for a person to be creative?

Energetic

Playful

Autonomy

Discipline

persistence

Intelligence

Innate talent

Independence

Self-confidence

Self-doubt

Imagination

Naïve

sense of reality

humble

arrogance

respect for tradition

tendency to rebel against tradition

analytical

intuitive

knowledgeable

ignorance

Many interests

acceptance of pain and difficulty

Fear of failure

Need to avoid mistakes

capacity to evaluate realistically

Critical thinking ability

Analogical reasoning ability

Artistic tendencies

Divergent thinking ability

Problem finding ability

Intrinsic motivation

Extrinsic motivation

12. Followings are some activities in EFL classroom, which characteristics or abilities of learners' mentioned above do you think could be elicited?

1. Real-life grammar

Procedure

■Show students some grammar feature in real-life use in a film, book, text or any audio material. Examples: *The Hours* film trailer for reported speech, or a section from *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* for third conditionals.

■Ask students to search the internet, or their film, book and audio collections at home for similar examples of the grammar feature they have just seen or heard in your example.

■Ask students to share the samples they have found in their favourite films, videos, texts and audio materials by posting them (or their links) to the course online space.

2. My day so far Aim (Imaginative trigger, Combining grammar and creativity: constraints and freedom)

Procedure

■Display the pictures or objects.

■Ask students to work in pairs and choose one object.

■Then ask them to work individually. They should think of all the things that the object might have done during one day. Give them a time limit of around five minutes to write as many things as they can think of, for example: – for a pen: lay on the desk, wrote a love letter, drew a picture,scribbled on the wall, ran out of ink, ended up in the wastepaper bin.
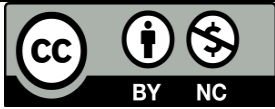
■They should compare lists in pairs and then use the ideas to write a short narrative of the object's day.

■Pairs can read their narratives out and the others should guess the object.

13. (Perceived environmental Factors for Cultivating Creativity)
Please tick the one that you think is related to Achieving a Creative Classroom (According to the suggestions provided by Maley and Kiss)
1. a relaxed, non-judgmental atmosphere
2. Frame activities with constraints
3. Use a Variety of inputs, process, and products
4. Use creative inputs, such as art, music and song, literature, drama and film
5. Use humour, laughter and surprise
6. 'Publish' Student Work in some way
7. Encourage curiosity and noticing
8. Appropriate feedback: do not make them feel they have failed when they get something wrong
9. Be a role model
10. Acknowledge the individuality of students
11. Do creative activities regularly
12. Listen carefully and without pre-judgements
13. Give students right level of challenge
14. Offer support to them while they struggle to meet that challenge