

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Rationale

Creativity is a concept that has been attracting people's attention for the past few decades, especially in the school systems. Generally, it first began being studied in the 1950s, with booms in the 60s, 70s, 90s and currently with a focus in the classroom. (Helson, 1990; Runco and Albert, 1990) In Thailand, the concept of creativity in education has been in discussion for the past 15 years, mostly without a successful implementation due to the country's cultural ideologies. (Mounier and Tangchuang, 2010) Fostering creativity can be done through a number of methodologies, including divergent thinking, which is the most common measurement of creativity, and in the language classroom it can be done through the student-centered approach.

There are many problems regarding the teaching for divergent thinking in the language classroom. First, the majority of the school systems are not promoting divergent thinking nor promoting creativity. Most of the school systems are, sadly, hindering creativity. (Robinson, 2009) This can clearly be seen in the English classrooms around Thailand, where rote memorization and stiff learning methodologies are still being used, and where sometimes "teachers treat students like a whiteboard". (UNESCO, 2011; Kaewmala, 2012; Fernquest, 2011; Ahuja, 2011) The activities used by the teachers have not been aimed towards divergent thinking, either due to a lack of knowledge on this methodology, because teachers themselves

are not well qualified for their current English teaching position or because education as a whole has not focused on encouraging it. (Kaewmala, 2012) Instead, education has focused more on the ability to recall and retell stories accurately rather than preparing children to become linguistically creative, or to memorize English grammar rules rather than encourage communicative language skills (Guilln and Bermejo, 2011).

Second, when focusing on the ability to recall and retell stories accurately, students are encouraged to believe that there is one correct answer only, thus, stigmatizing mistakes and any other answers given by students. (Guilln and Bermejo, 2011) Third, the English language curriculum is being dominated by the concept that standardized testing is the best option, where it is therefore narrowed to fulfill the needs of such tests, and prescribed textbooks to prepare students for the tests are the only materials used in the classroom. This can also be seen in the Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM), an informal global policy program that relies on certain assumptions to improve the education systems, having the adoption of high-stakes accountability policies, including high-stakes examinations, as a main feature together with teaching with prescribed curriculums. (Sahlberg, 2011) However, figures have shown that testing is not the solution. (Sahlberg, 2011) Unfortunately, essential life skills, which can be found in divergent thinking, are being oppressed by the system, which instead encourages students to find conventional answers and encourages rote memorization. This is especially true for the language classroom.

Looking through the problems, three main causes can be seen in the English language teaching practice: stigmatizing mistakes and focusing on one correct answer only; a lack of activities which bring divergent thinking into the classroom, where teachers should not only teach creatively but instead focus on teaching for creativity

by using student-centered approaches; and finally standardized testing. Sadly, Thailand currently encounters these three problem-causers within its English system throughout the country. However, school systems can adapt and make changes in order to implement divergent thinking in its English curriculum through the implementation of student-centered activities, however, it must be open to the new culture of the 21st century and the English culture. Unfortunately, Thailand still believes that it can incorporate a new curriculum and keep its traditional hierarchy and values, which contradict the new curriculum and methods of teaching. (Mounier and Tangchuang, 2010) In Thailand, the ministry of education is clearly setting up goals; however, they are not preparing English teachers and institutions to effectively implement them, making it a failure. (Mounier and Tangchuang, 2010)

English teachers often do not think of themselves as creative individuals, most not even being aware of divergent thinking, and instead, follow the norms given by the institution. It is oftentimes easier for English teachers to follow what they have been told or the methodology used in the past, rather than thinking of new teaching approaches. Other times, language teachers are aware of the need for creativity but simply do not know how to achieve it. An example of that is a primary school teacher at a local International School, who believes that creativity is needed in the English classroom as well as in other subjects, and thinks that her classroom lacks in creative activities, however, argues that she is not good in role-play and coming up with new games. The main causes of this problem are: a lack of student-centered activities, within teachers' reach, which allow teachers to develop divergent thinking in students, opening doors to creative assessment; a lack of activities which teach for creativity as well as for academic success; a lack of student-centered activities which allow students to choose amongst a variety of reading and writing styles, giving them

autonomy, a characteristic of both student-centeredness and divergent thinking, within the context; a lack of activities which encourage the writing or analysis of stories, rather than recalling and retelling; and teachers are not being incentivized to be creative in the classroom, where most have no knowledge on how to teach creatively or teach for creativity.

As seen above, there are a variety of problems in bringing divergent thinking into the language classroom. Above all, most literature on creativity in the classroom regards a number of other perspectives, but lack to consider the creativity in the language classroom. Researchers emphasize the need for creativity in the school system as a whole (Robinson, 2009) (Kaufman, Plucker and Baer 2008; Keller-Mathers 2011) but often it does not mention the language classroom, hence, an additional problem.

There are exceptions in the world, such as the Finnish education system where students are encouraged to study what they are interested in, which causes students to enjoy what they are learning and therefore have a greater number of innovative ideas, and where English levels are not surprisingly high. Finland aims to not follow the norms that other countries have been following and seems to have exceeded in its results, shown by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) on the past 3 years. While other English programs are in a downward spiral, desperately searching for a solution to improve its students learning but only applying ineffective methods, Finland has been in the eyes of global educators for having an effective system, desired by many nations, allowing students to be autonomous and creative. (Sahlberg, 2011)

One solution alone will not solve the problem within an entire language teaching system and a set of different attitudes must be taken in order to change the

system of an entire country, (Sahlberg, 2011) nevertheless, using the strategies and methodology of the activities mentioned in this research will help primary level English teachers make an immediate and effective change in their English classroom. It can make a change on the way teachers see creativity in the language classroom, and is able to demonstrate how creativity can be achieved by using simple student-centered activities which will enhance students' skills in divergent thinking. It aims to give unprepared primary level English teachers hope that there are easy ways in which an English learning classroom can foster divergent thinking, while keeping students motivated and interested in the lesson. Students will be exposed to student-centered activities, which will increase their divergent thinking, hence, increasing creativity. The learner-centered approach is composed of a variety of characteristics, which can also be found in the divergent thinking theory, such as autonomy, and therefore is ideal for conveying the divergent thinking skills.

Creativity in the primary level English as a Second Language (ESL) environment in an international setting has not been approached by many researchers as of yet, and it is believed that there is a strong need for that, as around the world there are thousands of international schools (and other schools) in need of creativity. Not only that, but local schools can benefit by researches done in successful English learning settings, and take away useful ideas to implement and immediately improve the English learning in the primary level Thai setting.

Creativity has been proven to assist people in their later lives and is considered an essential skill to cope with the future changes by many multinational companies. (Albert, 1990; Sahlberg, 2011) Therefore, it is evident that schools need to implement activities that support and enhance students' creativity from the lower primary school years onwards. Sir Ken Robinson, a chair of the UK Government and expert in

creativity in the education system, described a research that showed that “young people lost their ability to think in ‘divergent or non-linear ways’, a key component in creativity. (Bartel, 2008; Connors, 2010) Of 1,600 children aged three to five who were tested, 98% showed that they could think in divergent ways. By the time they were aged eight to ten, 32% could think divergently. When the same test was applied to thirteen to fifteen year olds, only 10% could think in this way. And when the test was used with 200,000 25-year-olds, only 2% could think divergently.” This problem should be administered before it starts to appear, and therefore the primary school level is the place of such research.

Perhaps surprisingly, this has great relevance to primary level English teaching, affecting the language classrooms in Thailand. The discussion above is central to a controversy that has been taking place in Thailand during the past few years. The Basic Education Curriculum (2001) by the Ministry of Education in Thailand reveals great goals for its education, especially for the language classroom, with its crucial goals of fostering morality, intellectual development, happiness, competitive potential, and creative/positive competition in the world arena. In brief, the reader will be marveled by the efficiency of the Thai education system (see Appendix A). Unfortunately, as many teachers and experts report that the Thai education reform has failed, especially in the language classroom where students leave without being able to communicate in the target language. (Mounier and Tangchuang, 2010; Ketudat, 1996; UNESCO, 2011; Kaewmala, 2012; Trivitayakhun, 2010; Bunnag, 2010; Ahuja, 2011; Fernquest, 2011; Trivitayakhun, 2010)

This study implemented student-centered activities in order to enhance the primary school level ESL students’ divergent thinking, by encouraging the student-centered activities and enhancing its characteristics that are in common with the

divergent thinking characteristics. These can then be implemented by Thai teachers in their primary school level English classroom, and brighten their ideas for classroom activities.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

This study has two main objectives:

- To study the effectiveness of promoting the divergent thinking of primary school students through learner-centered activities.
- To investigate students' capacity for expressing creativity before and after the implementation of the learner-centered activities.

1.3 Scope of the Study

1. The samples of the study are non-native English students aged between 7 and 9 years old, from an International School in Chiang Mai, Thailand, Year 3 in the British system. They are beginner learners of the English language.
2. The independent variable is the learner-centered activity.
3. The dependent variables are the divergent thinking and the capacity for expressing creativity.
4. The activities designed are based on the learner-centered approach, being based on literacy and communicative skills, through discussion, role-play, writing, group work, and storytelling.
5. Due to the samples' beginner level of English, the divergent thinking skill accounts on the performance of vocabulary, expressions, and ideas in English only.

1.4 Limitations of the Study

1. Students from English as a Second Language (ESL) class were selected, thus only five students participated in this study.

2. The implementation of the divergent thinking learning activities covers only 23 hours.

3. In terms of language performance, students' different cultural backgrounds are not examined in this study.

1.5 Definitions of Terms

1.5.1 Divergent Thinking

Divergent thinking is a process where ideas arise, where primary level students are encouraged to think out-of-the-box and come up with as many new and individual vocabulary, expressions and ideas for a proposed/encountered problem as possible. The divergent thinking is assessed on the following aspects of divergent thinking, adapted from Guilford (quoted in Runco, 1991): originality, flexibility, fluency and elaboration.

1.5.2 Learner-Centered Activities

The learner-centered activities used in this study are role-play, writing stories, group work and class discussion. Brainstorming is present in all activities. They are assessed through the classroom observation checklist and two Year 3 teachers from the International School.

1.5.3 Capacity for Expressing Creativity

It is the subjects' capability to convey their creative abilities, assessed through the Instances Tests, a set of activities designed in order to gather students' vocabulary, expressions and ideas of a solution to a given problem; and Teachers' Evaluation of Students' Creativity.

1.5.4 Primary School Level

The level at which students are at their schooling life, more specifically between the ages of four to twelve years old. In this study, the students are ESL students aged between seven and nine years old, in Year 3 in the British system.

1.6 Contributions of the Study

1. This research aims at aiding the teachers and students of the primary school level of the English language in Thailand, in order to improve the teaching and learning of the language through student-centered activities.
2. The English teachers will be encouraged to take a step further and prepare activities similar with those proposed by the research, rather than teaching for the test by using prescribed English textbooks which do not take into account students' needs; using the student-centered approach in order to develop activities that will fit the context they are faced with. This will lead towards divergent thinking enhancement, hence, an enhancement in creativity. The usage of such activities can serve as an immediate change to the language classroom, which is needed in Thailand.
3. The students can benefit from this research because they will be exposed to English learning student-centered activities that will improve their divergent thinking, as well as their communicative skills. They will have the opportunity to be encouraged by the environment and the teacher to be innovative and will be exposed more often to the English language culture. Students will be exposed to a successful method of language teaching, rather than being exposed to traditional methods, which have not been successful. They will

learn to appreciate the English language, changing its attitudes towards it and increasing their motivation towards English language learning.

1.7 Summary

Chapter one provides the background of the study. It includes the objectives, scope, limitations, definition of terms, and contributions of the study.

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