

Creative Thinking in Language Classrooms: A Qualitative Study of Instructional Practices, Divergent Thinking, and Curriculum Constraints

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Abstract. This study explores how creative thinking emerges in language classrooms through the interaction of instructional practices, learner cognition, and curriculum constraints. Grounded in an integrated framework that combines Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Guilford and Runco's divergent thinking theory, and Amabile's componential creativity theory, the study adopts a qualitative interpretivist design based on semi-structured interviews with 22 English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in Amman, Jordan. Thematic analysis reveals that dialogic and interactive instructional strategies enable creative engagement by stimulating fluency, flexibility, and originality in language use. However, rigid syllabi, limited instructional time, and the high-stakes Tawjihi examination constrain these practices. Crucially, curriculum constraints do not merely reduce creativity but reshape how teachers operationalize creative pedagogy, leading to adaptive practices such as "small creativity" brief, compressed creative episodes embedded within examination preparation lessons. The study also identifies second language (L2) proficiency as a condition shaping the expression of creative thinking, showing that lower-proficiency learners may struggle to demonstrate creative thinking even when instructional conditions are supportive. The study concludes that creative thinking is mediated, bounded, and a proficiency-conditioned process, not an individual cognitive trait. This research contributes to the EFL creativity literature by documenting how Jordanian teachers negotiate the interaction of pedagogy, learner cognition, linguistic proficiency, and curriculum constraints under the Tawjihi system, while identifying the adaptive practice of "small creativity" as a contextually situated pedagogical response to institutional constraints. The findings extend understandings of creativity in language education by demonstrating how teachers adapt creative pedagogies within examination-oriented environments rather than abandoning them.

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1. Introduction

With increasing focus on skills for the 21st century, creative thinking has emerged as a vital outcome of modern education systems. Within language learning settings, where communication inherently involves meaning construction and linguistic generation, creativity enables the production of unique linguistic expressions, adaptability to different communicative situations, and engagement with learning materials through varied language use (Kormos et al., 2024; Wu & Zeng, 2025). Current literature further indicates that creativity plays an important role in language attainment by influencing speaking fluency, written proficiency, and communicative success (Qin, 2025; Wang et al., 2024).

However, this body of research tends to approach creativity mainly from an individual cognitive perspective and does not address creativity as a process influenced by institutional frameworks that include the curricula, assessment, teaching time, and teaching philosophies. There is another factor which affects the development of creativity in L2 settings, namely that students can have creative thoughts but lack the necessary language skills to convey their ideas, or that language innovations can actually be taken as mistakes (Jones, 2020; Maley & Kiss, 2018). Despite past efforts in examining creativity, dialogic teaching, and curriculum constraints, there has been minimal effort towards understanding how these variables intersect within the real EFL classroom experience. Specifically, few qualitative studies have focused on how teachers work with creativity-focused teaching in an examination-centered environment.

This research study incorporates a comprehensive theoretical approach incorporating sociocultural theory by Vygotsky (2004), divergent thinking theory by Guilford (1967) and Runco (2022), and componential creativity theory by Amabile (1996). Sociocultural theory defines creativity as a social process resulting from interaction, conversation, and culture. The divergent thinking theory recognizes fluency, flexibility, and originality as the primary mental processes associated with creativity. On the other hand, componential theory argues that creativity is reliant on external factors, such as freedom, institutions, and time and resource allocation. The theories are not conflicting since they all focus on distinct aspects of creativity.

The latest studies show that dialogic and learner-centered teaching promote creative learning in language classes (Sun et al., 2025; Zamana et al., 2025). As a result, the teaching methods used by teachers are important for fostering creativity among students in classrooms (Wu & Zeng, 2025). However, the pedagogy of creativity faces many challenges due to strict curricula, short instructional hours, and examination-focused lessons (Ma & Wang, 2025; Subrata et al., 2026). Even though there is much debate about the mentioned issues, few researchers have studied how teachers handle the conflict between teaching creatively and following institutional policies in the context of everyday practice.

In light of this, the aim of this research is to study the development of creative thinking in Jordanian EFL classes based on the interaction between teaching approaches, cognitive processes of the learners, their language abilities, and curricular factors. In this study, situated within the framework of Tawjihi examination, teachers' attempts to encourage creativity amid institutional challenges will be discussed. The current research adds another pedagogical approach to creativity to the literature, termed "small creativity."

1.1 Research Questions

To examine how teachers foster creative thinking under curriculum constraints, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do language teachers conceptualize creative thinking in classroom practice?
2. How are instructional strategies used to foster creative thinking in language learning environments?
3. How do curriculum constraints influence teachers' ability to promote creative thinking?
4. How do teachers experience the interaction between instructional practices and institutional constraints in shaping creative thinking?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Creative Thinking as a Multidimensional Educational Construct

Creative thinking is commonly defined as a higher-order cognitive process that involves fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration, all of which are closely linked to divergent thinking (Guilford, 1967; Runco, 2022). Meta-analytic studies indicate that divergent thinking serves as a significant predictor of creative performance, although its effects differ according to context (Said-Metwaly et al., 2024). Within educational research, creative thinking is increasingly viewed as a central component of reasoning and problem-solving processes.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of the literature in creativity still perceives creativity as a quality inherent in individuals and capable of being assessed outside the classroom context. However, within L2 contexts, there is a different dynamic at play owing to the fact that students' linguistic limitations can hinder their ability to express their creativity (Jones, 2020; Maley & Kiss, 2018). Creativity is also understood as a sociocultural and distributed process rather than an individual trait (Glăveanu, 2014).

It has recently been shown by applied linguists that the creativity involved in second language contexts is language- and context-dependent. According to Kormos et al. (2024), the correlation between creativity and performance in writing activities is task-dependent, while according to Qin (2025), the process of creativity in L2 speech production is proficiency-dependent. Such results lead us to conclude that creativity within the confines of language classrooms is not only a matter of psychology but also of linguistics. Hence, the issue investigated in this paper is how teachers deal with the problem of balancing creativity and proficiency in English language classrooms.

2.2 Sociocultural Foundations: Creativity as Socially Mediated

The theoretical framework guiding this research includes Lev Vygotsky's (2004) sociocultural theory, where creativity is regarded as a socially mediated construct developing as a result of interaction, language use, and cultural engagement. According to this approach, creativity is fostered as part of collaborative learning and constructive dialogue taking place within the zone of proximal development (ZPD). This sociocultural view of creativity was later expanded through developmental studies examining children's imaginative activities and learning environments (Lindqvist, 2003). Therefore, instructional approaches such as classroom discourse and scaffolding become tools, not only for teaching, but also for fostering creativity.

As far as language education is concerned, there have been previous studies on the positive impact of dialogical approaches to teaching and exploratory activities performed in the classroom environment on learners' creativity (Segundo-Marcos et al., 2025; Tao et al., 2026). However, less attention has been given to how opportunities for interaction and collaborative meaning-making vary across different educational contexts. This study attempts to fill this research gap in relation to Jordanian EFL classrooms.

2.3 Cognitive Foundations: Divergent Thinking in L2 Performance

While sociocultural theory accounts for creativity from the standpoint of socially mediated phenomena, divergent thinking is more concerned with the mental mechanisms behind creativity. Divergent thinking is described as the capacity to come up with various solutions or responses as opposed to just one right answer (Guilford, 1967; Runco, 2022).

In language teaching settings, divergent thinking takes the form of flexible language use, diverse communication methods, and innovative modes of expression (Verde, 2022). The recent literature shows that the connection between divergent thinking and proficiency in an L2 greatly varies depending on the nature of the task. For example, Suzuki et al. (2022) have shown that creativity positively predicted speaking fluency in open narrative exercises, while Wang et al. (2024) found that originality increased the quality of writing only when it involved open-ended tasks. It follows from such findings that divergent thinking within language classrooms is associated to a lesser extent with creativity classes and more with task features that enable different understandings and responses to them. Consequently, the current research focuses on teacher choice and adaptation of creativity-related tasks in the light of curriculum limitations.

2.4 Environmental Foundations: Constraints as Structural and Interpretive

Amabile (1996) asserts that the componential theory highlights how the environment could either support or hamper the creative process. In the educational context, some factors such as learner autonomy, organizational structure, availability of time for instruction, and testing could significantly influence the likelihood of creativity. Therefore, curriculum design, time constraints within the class, and testing could limit creativity-oriented learning approaches. Earlier findings have revealed that curriculum rigidity and examination pressure constitute the major impediments to creativity-oriented

pedagogy (Alsalti et al., 2021; Bereczki & Kárpáti, 2018; Fitriyah & Kurniawati, 2025; Ma & Wang, 2025). Nevertheless, according to some contemporary qualitative findings, instead of facing such challenges in terms of rigid structural constraints, teachers creatively perceive, negotiate, and cope with them through classroom teaching (Upadhyay et al., 2025). Thus, the current study examines how teachers perceive and cope with curriculum constraints while practising creativity-oriented pedagogy in Jordanian EFL classes.

2.5 Creative Pedagogy as a Negotiated Practice

Creative teaching is not a methodological technique but rather a principled practice that entails autonomous learning, dialogical learning, inquiry-based activities, and acceptance of ambiguity (Nhan et al., 2025; Sun et al., 2025). However, the implementation of such practices may be determined by the context in which the process takes place. For instance, teachers may adapt creativity-oriented activities to fit the practical demands of their instructional contexts.

Another problem associated with EFL teaching is the connection between linguistic ability and creative expression. The students may come up with original ideas but lack the necessary language skills to convey their ideas effectively in the foreign language. Thus, the creative expression of thoughts becomes limited owing to linguistic issues and not to creativity-related difficulties (Jones, 2020; Verde, 2022). Moreover, activities aimed at developing creativity usually need more time to be implemented than test preparation classes provide.

2.6 Assessing Creativity: The Torrance Framework and Its Limits

The Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT) remain among the most widely used measures of creativity and assess dimensions such as fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration (Alabbasi et al., 2022; Torrance, 1974). While the current research does not make use of the TTCT as an instrument for measuring constructs, it is nevertheless worth mentioning that they are important in our context, as they provide a useful theoretical base to help understand the phenomenon of creativity, particularly in the field of education. For our research purposes, they are used only as sensitizing concepts.

2.7 Synthesis and Analytical Framework

Creativity in language education, based on the analyzed literature, is an activity that exists at three levels of interconnectedness – social, cognitive, and institutional. The development of creativity in an L2 classroom does not rely exclusively on processes of divergent thinking but is affected by social interactions, linguistic ability, the nature of tasks assigned, and curriculum-related factors. Recent research further suggests that teachers actively interpret and negotiate contextual constraints rather than responding to them passively.

In summary, from the reviewed literature on creativity in language education, it is clear that creativity in language education cannot simply be seen as a cognitive skill but should rather be viewed within the context of a complex socially constructed process. Accordingly, the present study integrates sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 2004), divergent thinking theory (Guilford, 1967; Runco, 2022),

and Amabile's (1996) environmental perspective as sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954) to guide the analysis of:

- how instructional practices socially mediate creative thinking (Vygotsky);
- how learners generate multiple, flexible, original ideas (divergent thinking);
- how curriculum constraints shape the possibility space for both (Amabile); and
- how teachers interpret and negotiate these processes (interpretive layer)

This integrated framework is applied within the Jordanian EFL context to investigate how pedagogy, cognition, linguistic proficiency, and institutional constraints interact in teachers' everyday classroom practices. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework that guides the study:

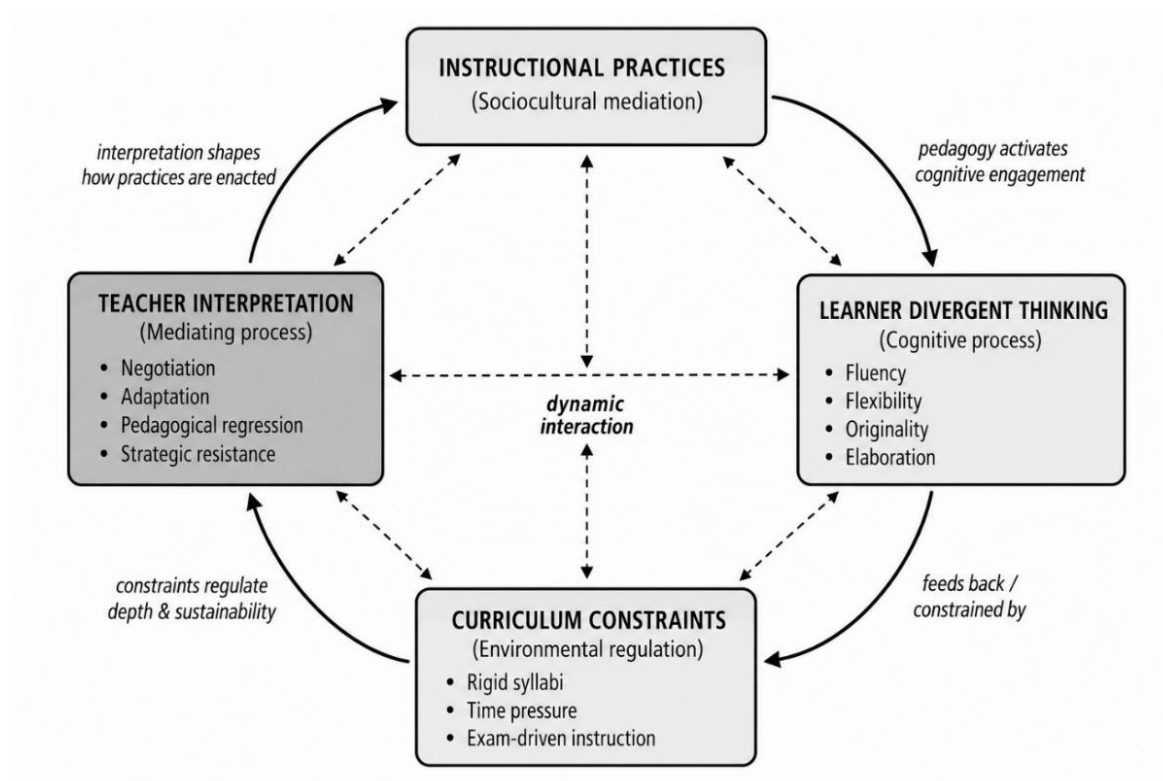


Figure 1: Conceptual model of instructional practices, creative thinking, and curriculum constraints in language education

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research employs a qualitative research design based on interpretivism with a phenomenological perspective to investigate the perceptions and experiences of language teachers regarding the connection between instructional approaches and creativity under curriculum constraints. Phenomenology provided the framework within which the research explored teachers' perceptions regarding creative teaching in the context of the curriculum, whereas reflexive thematic analysis was applied for pattern recognition in the collected data.

A qualitative methodology was suitable because creative thinking in the classroom is a socially constructed concept. This means that its understanding depends on the teachers' perceptions; this requires an in-depth investigation of teachers' experiences.

3.2 Context and Participants

The study was carried out among public secondary schools and private preparatory programs for learning EFL in Amman, Jordan. The state itself offers a fascinating context from a theoretical point of view when examining the problem of creativity in relation to curriculum limitations: despite the fact that it promotes innovative ideas in terms of curricula which foster critical thinking skills, at the same time, the state depends on the Tawjihi examination, which is focused on convergent and rote knowledge.

A total of 22 EFL instructors participated in this study, 14 of whom were females, and eight were males, with a combined total of between three and 22 years of teaching experience ($M=10.6$ years). A purposeful sampling technique was used for selecting participants who had practised at least one open-ended or communicative task in the class in the previous month prior to conducting this research. These participants were selected from schools or learning centres, and they had to have had previous exposure to communicative or open-ended classroom tasks. The process of sampling was continued till the saturation point reached after the eighteenth interview. However, four other interviews were also conducted to ensure the non-emergence of any new theme (Guest et al., 2020).

3.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were carried out that lasted from forty-five to sixty minutes, either in person or through a secure video conferencing platform. Three main areas were covered in the interview: teachers' definition of creative thinking; examples of lessons where creativity was experienced; and the restrictions posed by the curriculum, such as syllabus schedule, examinations, and lack of time. The interview procedure was formulated based on the research questions and theoretical framework and was examined by two experts in language education.

All interviews were conducted in Arabic by the first author who was an Arabic native speaker and an EFL teacher educator. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The translation of the quotes was done by a bilingual researcher; any discrepancies in interpretation were sorted out through discussion among the researchers. A limitation of the research is not having any data from the teachers' classrooms as there are no interviews with the students and only self-reporting from the teachers is used.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data were coded through reflexive thematic analysis, adopting the six-phases method described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved familiarization with the data, code generation, theme development, theme review, and theme definition prior to reporting the findings. The data were coded using a combination of deductive and inductive processes. The inductive coding process facilitated the emergence of themes from the data. On the other hand, the

deductive coding process helped sensitize the analysis based on concepts drawn from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Amabile's componential theory, and divergent thinking theory. Table 1 shows the entire theoretical coding frame used in the deductive process.

All transcripts were then analysed by the first author using NVivo 14. In addition, 30% of the transcripts were independently analysed by another researcher. The analysis revealed a level of agreement of 86% between coders regarding theme recognition. Since this study employed reflexive thematic analysis, the emphasis was placed on identifying patterns and developing meaning rather than quantifying coded segments; therefore, no statistical representation of coding frequencies was carried out. The analysis was performed in Arabic language to maintain the accuracy of data and then translated into English at the stage of reporting.

Table 1: Theoretical coding framework for data analysis

Theoretical Lens	Core Dimension	Primary Codes	Sub-Codes	Indicative Classroom Evidence
Vygotsky's sociocultural theory	Social mediation of learning	Interaction	Dialogic teaching, questioning, feedback	Teacher-student dialogue and co-construction of meaning
		Collaboration	Group work, peer learning	Students negotiating ideas and meanings together
		ZPD scaffolding	Guided support, modeling	Teacher assistance beyond independent learner ability
		Language mediation	Verbal reasoning, discussion	Language used as a thinking tool
Amabile's componential theory	Environmental conditions	Curriculum constraints	Time pressure, rigid syllabus, exams	Limited time allocated for creative tasks
		Institutional support	Autonomy, resources	Degree of flexibility permitted in teaching
		Classroom climate	Psychological safety, openness	Encouragement of student expression without fear of error
	Individual factors	Motivation	Interest, engagement	Student willingness to

				participate voluntarily
		Domain skills	Linguistic competence	Ability to express creative ideas in English
Divergent thinking theory (Guilford/Runco)	Cognitive processes	Fluency	Multiple idea generation	Students producing many different responses
		Flexibility	Perspective shifting	Varied approaches to the same task
		Originality	Novel responses	Unexpected or unique ideas
		Elaboration	Detail expansion	Extended and enriched responses
	Problem-solving orientation	Open-ended thinking	Multiple solutions	Tasks designed without a single correct answer
Creative pedagogy integration	Instructional design	Interactive learning	Discussion, role-play	Active student participation and engagement
		Inquiry-based learning	Exploration, questioning	Student driven discovery processes
		Technology use	Digital tools	Multimedia supported creative expression

3.5 Trustworthiness

The credibility of the results obtained was increased through participant verification. In this respect, five participants verified interpretations of their interviews to be accurate, while minor modifications were made to the analysis. Dependability of this research was achieved through a full audit trail of all transcripts, coding notes, and analytical memos. Reflexive journaling was employed for confirmability of results by recording all assumptions and possible biases, especially on the western understanding of creativity. Transferability was assured by detailed contextual information about the Jordanian Tawjihi examinations and curriculum reform process.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan (IRB No. 22/6/2025–2026). Participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were assured of the voluntary nature of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses.

4. Results

4.1 Overview of Emergent Themes

Three themes that arose from the thematic analysis were instructional strategies as triggers of creativity, cognitive involvement of the learner and divergent thinking, and curriculum constraints as structural constraints on creativity. Creativity was seen to be context dependent, depending on pedagogy, language proficiency, and institutions of learning.

4.2 Instructional Practices as Catalysts for Creative Engagement

The participants always stressed dialogic teaching, interactive learning, and learner-centered instruction as key prerequisites of developing creativity. The teachers indicated that open dialogue encouraged students to stop memorizing and start producing more innovative answers.

In particular, one participant pointed out that "the moment I design my lesson plans so that the discussion is free, then I see that the students think more creatively and they do not memorize anymore" (T3). Another teacher claimed that "creativity occurs when the students don't have one correct answer only" (T7). Also, a further participant said that posing "Why?", "How?" and "What if?" questions resulted in "unexpected ideas" on behalf of the students (T15). Thus, it can be seen that there was a strong link between creativity and the dialogic/exploratory atmosphere in the classroom.

4.3 Learner Cognitive Engagement and Divergent Idea Generation

Creativity was seen as the capacity of learners to come up with many interpretations and linguistic expressions during open-ended tasks. As one participant said, "A single student does not just repeat what they have learned. They can say something in a variety of ways, and that is where creativity comes from" (T11). "I never expected such ideas from my students," said another participant, adding that this happens "...when there are no set guidelines for an activity" (T2).

It should also be noted that some participants stressed the importance of linguistic skills in fostering creativity. As one participant observed, "The poor student can come up with creative ideas using Arabic, but when it comes to English, they cannot say it because 'the language itself stands in the way, not the idea'" (T18).

4.4 Curriculum Constraints as Structural Limitations

Teachers stated the most restrictive factors for their ability to teach creatively included the constraints of the school curriculum and Tawjihi examinations. Some teachers' responses illustrated this as "the curriculum is so tight" (T5), "all we are concerned with is getting them ready for Tawjihi" (T14). Owing to these constraints, many teachers found it necessary to rely on lecture-style delivery as opposed to incorporating alternative and possibly more innovative instructional techniques. The curriculum coverage requirement was identified by several teachers as a constraint on opportunities for exploratory learning. As T8 explained, "There is simply no time to extend activities when students are preparing for examinations," while T16 noted that creative tasks were often reduced in order to ensure that the required syllabus content was completed.

Although teachers generally valued creativity-oriented approaches, they reported that examination preparation tended to take priority over more exploratory classroom practices.

4.5 Interaction between Instructional Practices and Curriculum Constraints

Although there were many creative approaches employed by the participating teachers, all noted that "the demands of an institution" greatly influence how much creativity can be used in the classroom. Teachers also reported that owing to "limited time" and "curriculum pressures," they are frequently unable to implement all their creative ideas. Nonetheless, very few teachers reported abandoning creativity altogether. Instead, they described adapting activities, shortening discussion time, or integrating creative tasks within existing curriculum requirements. These adjustments indicate that creativity-focused teaching was reshaped rather than eliminated under institutional pressures.

T14 stated, "I sometimes think of some creative ideas for lessons, but when it comes down to actually implementing them; they seem less creative than I thought." T10 reported using what she called "small creativity," which consisted of finding ways to utilize ten minutes of every day's lesson plan for a creative activity. T19 reported using textbook-based task open-ended questions such as "What if?" and "What will happen next?" to encourage students' creative thinking. The results suggest that although the curriculum may limit one's potential for being creative, it is not entirely impossible to create a creative learning environment.

4.6 Linguistic Proficiency as a Contextual Condition for Creative Expression

Several teachers noted that creativity cannot be considered independently of learners' ability to express their ideas in English. While students often showed creative thinking in terms of ideas, teachers observed that limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge sometimes prevented them from communicating those ideas effectively. As one participant put it, "The language itself stands in the way, not the idea" (T18). Similarly, T9 explained that some learners "...have interesting ideas but cannot explain them fully in English." These perspectives indicate that creative expression in EFL classrooms is influenced not only by teaching strategies but also by learners' language proficiency. Teachers also described adapting tasks through scaffolding, modeling, and additional language support to help students engage more fully in open-ended activities.

4.7 Integrated Interpretation of Findings

Results indicate that teaching techniques, thinking processes, language ability, and institutional factors all influence creativity in Jordanian EFL classrooms. While teaching methods can encourage creativity, curriculum pressures often limit how much teachers can apply it. One important finding was the effect of students' language proficiency. As one teacher explained, "It is not that they cannot think creatively; it is just the language that becomes a barrier for them" (T18).

Table 2: Findings of theory mapping of emergent themes

Emergent Theme	Key Findings from Empirical Evidence	Vygotsky (Sociocultural Theory)	Amabile (Componential Theory)	Divergent Thinking Theory (Guilford/ Runco)
Instructional practices as catalysts for creative engagement	Teachers reported that dialogic teaching, interaction, and open-ended tasks enhance student originality, participation, and idea generation	Creativity emerges through social interaction, mediation, and scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development	Supports creativity through supportive environment and autonomy in instruction, enabling intrinsic motivation	Open ended tasks stimulate fluency and flexibility of ideas, enabling multiple response generation
Learner cognitive engagement and divergent idea generation	Students demonstrate multiple expressions, flexible language use, and alternative solutions when exposed to exploratory tasks	Learners co construct meaning through internalization of socially mediated language and interaction	Intrinsic motivation is activated when learners feel autonomy, increasing creative engagement	Direct manifestation of divergent thinking including fluency, originality, and flexibility in language production
Curriculum constraints as structural limitations	Rigid syllabi, time pressure, and exam-oriented instruction reduce opportunities for creative tasks and exploratory learning	Institutional structures limit opportunities for social mediation and scaffolded creativity	External constraints reduce domain relevant skill application and intrinsic motivation, weakening creativity	Restricted task design reduces opportunities for divergent ideation and multiple solution generation
Interaction between instructional practices and curriculum constraints	Even well-designed creative tasks are limited by time, syllabus coverage, and assessment pressures, leading to fragmented implementation	Weakens effectiveness of zone of proximal development-based interaction due to reduced instructional space	Constraints suppress the environmental support system required for creativity including autonomy, time, and encouragement	Limits exposure to tasks requiring divergent thinking processes, reducing cognitive flexibility
Linguistic proficiency as a contextual condition for creative expression	Lower proficiency students struggle to demonstrate creative thinking even when tasks are open ended, requiring additional scaffolding	Proficiency mediates the relationship between social interaction and creative expression	Relevant linguistic skills are necessary for creativity to manifest; without them, intrinsic motivation is insufficient	Divergent thinking in L2 is constrained by lexical and syntactic resources, not only by cognitive capacity
Overall integrated finding	Creativity is shaped by the interaction of pedagogy, cognition, proficiency, and institutional constraints rather than being an isolated skill	Creativity is a socially mediated and context dependent process	Creativity is an interaction between individual cognition, skill, and environment	Creativity is a multi-process cognitive function involving idea generation and flexibility under conditions of openness

5. Discussion

The results show that creativity in EFL classes in Jordan is influenced by the interaction between teaching processes, language skills of students, and other institutional factors, rather than only being a characteristic of individuals. In general, teachers define creativity as being flexible in thought, coming up with new ideas, and generating many possible answers. For example, "...that diversity is creativity for me" (T9). On the other hand, it should be noted that the students' ability to show their creative skills is highly contingent upon the linguistic competence of the individuals involved.

A number of instructional methods were pointed out by teachers as crucial in fostering creativity among EFL learners, ranging from dialogic instruction to open questions, collaborative work, and problem solving. Participants often mentioned using strategies such as asking "What if?" questions and assigning students role play tasks to foster divergent thinking and produce various answers. At the same time, these kinds of techniques appeared more productive when students had sufficient linguistic competence to speak up. This indicates that carefully selected activities may not be sufficient on their own to foster creative performance; language support is also required.

Simultaneously, teachers identified several organizational barriers to creativity. The inflexibility of the curriculum, limited class hours, and the test-oriented structure of the Tawjihi system emerged as key barriers. This meant that teachers tended to compromise when it came to implementing creative activities. In particular, teachers found themselves having to curtail creative activities, adapt them to fit the curriculum, or opt to prepare students for examinations rather than allow for exploration through more creative approaches. Nevertheless, there were instances of creativity even amidst these organizational barriers.

5.1 Instructional Practices as Sociocultural Mediation of Creativity

These results further emphasize the significance of dialogical and interactive approaches to teaching, which can foster the development of creative thought in EFL settings. According to the sociocultural approach – specifically Vygotsky (2004)'s version – creativity is not regarded as a personal ability, but rather a phenomenon that emerges from interaction, social scaffolding, and the co-construction of knowledge and understanding. The use of questioning strategies, feedback, and interactive tasks were mentioned by teachers to help learners explore various perspectives and come up with numerous ideas.

As one participant put it, "As long as I keep asking my students how, why, and what if, I'm still surprised by their improvement" (T15). The results also indicate that dialogic creativity is not a static process in which the same teaching strategy is adopted at all times, but a dynamic process shaped by the particularities of the context in which it operates (Moran & John-Steiner, 2003). This finding is consistent with earlier studies that have shown similar trends (Sun et al., 2025; Tao et al., 2026). However, it expands the current body of knowledge regarding the dynamic nature of dialogic teaching by illustrating the way teachers adapt their teaching methods within the constraints of their contexts.

5.2 Divergent Thinking as a Situated Cognitive Process in Language Learning

The results reveal that creative behavior in EFL classrooms is linked to divergent thinking skills such as flexibility, originality, and the production of alternative responses as defined by Guilford (1967) and Runco (2022). Nevertheless, divergent thinking skills were not identified as independent cognitive skills but were heavily influenced by interactions in the classroom and by language-related resources. In particular, one of the teachers mentioned that “My weaker students use their imagination much more when they talk in Arabic, but as soon as they start speaking in English, they become much simpler” (T18). This suggests that creativity in L2 classes is determined by language proficiency. There is corroborative evidence for this claim by Suzuki et al. (2022) and Wang et al. (2024).

5.3 Curriculum Constraints as Structural and Interpretive Boundaries

Constraints such as rigid curriculum, time pressure, and important examinations were always viewed as constraints in implementing a creativity-centered teaching style. According to Amabile (1996), constraints in a creative learning process can be viewed in terms of external environmental constraints within the componential theory of creativity.

These constraints were not regarded by teachers as prohibiting creative teaching. They actually adapted their method of teaching by modifying and compressing their lessons. One teacher described this adaptation as “small creativity,” in which short creative exercises are combined in the process of preparing for the examinations.

5.4 Interaction between Instructional Practice and Institutional Constraints

The findings demonstrate that instructional practices and institutional constraints interact in shaping creative thinking. These results illustrate how pedagogy and curriculum constraints do not exist independently but rather have an interconnected relationship. Consequently, a creativity-based pedagogy must always be negotiated as part of a process between intended pedagogy and required curriculum. The teachers discussed often having to make changes to creative activities in light of time constraints and the demands of the syllabus. As one participant said, “Sometimes I create some creative activities, but delete them for lack of time” (T14).

5.5 Linguistic Proficiency as a Contextual Condition for Creative Expression

In EFL classrooms, linguistic competence was seen to be another contextual factor which played an influential role in the manifestation of creative thought processes. As noted by all participating teachers, students who lacked proficiency in English could come up with ideas; however, they found it difficult to articulate these ideas in the foreign language.

As noted by one teacher, “...the language gets in the way, not the idea” (T18). This observation is consistent with earlier studies on creativity in L2 contexts (Kormos et al., 2024; Qin, 2025), where lack of linguistic competence has been cited as a limiting factor in creativity.

5.6 Teacher Agency and Negotiation within Constraints

The results emphasize the importance of teacher agency as a pivotal element in maintaining creativity under difficult conditions of education. Instead of merely following the curriculum policy, the teachers creatively modified the lesson content and activities to maintain opportunities for creative interaction. With help from methods such as "small creativity," alteration of task types, and careful selection of activities provided by textbooks, teachers balanced institutional demands and their pedagogical aims.

5.7 Integrated Theoretical Interpretation and Contribution to the Field

The results as a whole shed light on the development of an integrative perspective of creativity in EFL settings through sociocultural, cognitive, and environmental approaches to the topic. The notion of creativity becomes more complex and is shown to be conditioned by interaction, cognition, language skills, and constraints. Small creativity provides an extension to Amabile's (1996) componential approach to creativity in that environmental constraints are not only detrimental for creativity but also transform it into small episodes occurring in the instructional setting. Instead of making creative teaching impossible, institutional demands result in transforming it into small and feasible class events. Also, sociocultural theories of creativity become more specific with regard to both interactional and task-related aspects of creativity.

5.8 Practical Implications for Language Teaching and Curriculum Design

Conclusions drawn from this study show that the promotion of creativity in EFL classes necessitates both pedagogical ingenuity as well as institutional adaptability. Training programs for teachers must therefore focus on innovative teaching methods which incorporate creativity despite an examination-centered curriculum (Gradini et al., 2025; Zhao & Abdullah, 2025). Designers of the curriculum may find it beneficial to introduce flexible tasks that provide opportunities for creative inquiry despite a rigid curriculum. Likewise, assessment frameworks such as the Tawjihi examination might include elements that reward linguistic creativity.

5.9 Limitations and Future Research Directions

One limitation of this study includes the use of data derived solely from self-reports of teachers without triangulation using observation of classrooms or the views of students. Future research efforts should take a multi-method approach. Secondly, the sample population is located in Amman only, limiting external validity for other geographical locations. Further longitudinal research could examine the effects of changes in the curriculum on creativity-oriented teaching over time.

6. Conclusion

The study explored how creative thinking is developed in Jordanian EFL classes as an outcome of interactions among classroom instruction, learner cognition, linguistic competency, and limitations posed by the curriculum. The current study made important contributions to existing research in that it demonstrated how creativity in EFL classes could be considered an interactive process that was influenced by factors other than instructional strategies, including linguistic

competency and the examination-oriented curriculum. As a result, in this context, teachers did not apply creativity-oriented instruction directly but rather modified it within institutional limitations using flexible approaches such as "small creativity." Overall, the current study stresses the relevance of considering creativity in language teaching as an adaptive phenomenon constrained by the system and not as an independent faculty. It suggests that curriculum planning should be made more flexible and open to creativity in light of examination demands.

This study is constrained by teachers' self-reporting and by concentrating only on schools and language courses in Amman. For future research, it would be useful to combine classroom observation techniques with students' point of view and other types of studies in order to reveal more about the nature of creative development in EFL.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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7. Use of Artificial Intelligence

Grammarly was used exclusively for minor language editing to improve grammar, spelling and clarity. It was not used to generate scientific content, research ideas, data analyses, interpretations, or conclusions. The author is solely responsible for the manuscript's content, scientific accuracy, and integrity.

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