

ELT needs a bit creativity

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Abstract

What lies at the centre of the evolution of human language, according to complex/dynamic theory, is the need for humans to innovate and use language to construct new meaning. Language evolution studies propose that language grows in complexity over time to deal with complex tasks. Language goes through a trajectory of change in accordance with the needs of language users as they innovate complex language to handle complex tasks and communicate new meanings. However, in many language learning tasks used in research and language teaching, language is employed primarily to express 'known meaning' rather than to construct 'unknown meaning'. In order to increase the learner's desire to explore and retrieve less accessible language within and beyond their Zone of Proximal Development, this paper discusses how language learning tasks can be transformed into creative tasks. It proposes two conditions that facilitate creativity: the use of multicultural experiences and constraints.

Introduction:

The words 'real' and 'meaningful' are widely used and are much coveted terms in many discussions of ELT. In the communicative and utilitarian view of language that has dominated much recent ELT practice and discussion, language learning tasks should help learners use language to express 'meaning' or to 'communicate'; thus, conditions need to be set up to promote 'a communicative desire' to use language for a real purpose. However, the term 'meaning', which is vital to such a communicative view of language, is rarely challenged.

Elsewhere, I have argued how such a 'communicative' view of language and language learning is paradoxical and problematic. In particular, I have argued that despite the claim of a focus on 'meaning', the meaning many communicative language learning tasks tend to focus on is 'known meaning' or meaning 'known to self', although it may be unknown to the interlocutor. This can be found in many 'information-gap' or 'opinion-gap' tasks where students are provided with different pieces of information and are required to bridge the information gap through communication. It can also be found in many 'free' tasks where students are often required to use language to talk about familiar topics (for example 'Describe your family'). Such tasks require learners to use language to express 'known meaning' (i.e. meaning they know) to their interlocutors who may not have that information. This need to use language to express known meaning can result in what calls 'signal redundancy' (i.e. lack of desire to explore complex language). Although such information-gap tasks may create a 'communicative desire' in students (i.e. a need to use language for a communicative purpose), such tasks may result in a lack

of desire to explore, develop, and retrieve less accessible language. Learners may lose a desire to explore language utterances that are in the process of maturing or in their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Very often, learners finish the task using simple, safe, and known utterances instead of retrieving less accessible language and knowledge. The fact that the meaning to be communicated is already 'known to self' can result not only in a lack of desire among students to explore and challenge themselves but also in a lack of desire among teachers to teach new and demanding language.

The 'human need' to innovate and use language to construct new meaning

What lies at the centre of the evolution of human language, in complex/dynamic theory and emergentism, is the need for humans to innovate and use language to construct new meaning. Language evolution studies propose that language grows in complexity over time to deal with complex tasks (for example Language goes through a trajectory of change in accordance with the needs of language users, as users somehow innovate complex language to handle complex tasks and communicate about new meanings. Linguistic signs are continually created to meet new needs and circumstances . This view of language as a complex/dynamic system is applicable not just to L1 (first language) but also to L2 (second/foreign language) development (see, for example,. In other words, emergentist thinking, despite the dangers and limitations that can arise from misuse, is central to our understanding of the evolution and development of various complex phenomena, including both L1 and L2 language development.

In order to increase the learner's desire to explore and extend their language, I will discuss how language learning tasks can be transformed into creative tasks, promoting the need to use language to construct unknown meaning. In particular, I will propose how the use of multicultural experiences and constraints can facilitate creative language use. I will demonstrate how this can be done with reference to one particular topic we are all familiar with in ELT materials (i.e. talking about oneself and others). First, I will briefly discuss the meaning of 'creativity', its importance within language learning, and some features that could be added to language learning tasks to make them more creative.

Towards creativity in ELT: the need to say something new

'Creativity' is the 'ability to come up with new ideas that are surprising yet intelligible, and also valuable in some way' , and it involves different types of creative thinking. proposes three types of creative thinking through which new ideas can be produced:

- ▪ combinational thinking: this produces new ideas by associating old ideas in unfamiliar yet intelligible and valuable ways;
- ▪ exploratory thinking: this explores all possibilities inherent in a current conceptual space using existing rules; and
- ▪ transformational thinking: this significantly alters one or more rules of the current conceptual space.

Applying this view of creativity to language, language creativity can be defined as the playful use of language to construct new and surprising meaning. It involves various types of creative thinking and is a ubiquitous feature of everyday language use. Various degrees of language creativity ranging right across the spectrum are employed by different language users. The following are some examples where, through playful language use, the language user transforms the familiar into somewhat unfamiliar, new, and surprising meaning:

- ▪ ‘Because you’re mine, I walk the line’: a line from a song, producing an unusual meaning through exploratory thinking, i.e. using the existing rules of rhyming ‘mine’—‘line’.
- ▪ ‘Cats walk thin and sleep fat’: a line from a poem for children, producing an unusual image of cats through combinational thinking by associating ideas from different remote areas in an unfamiliar way (‘walk, sleep’ versus ‘thin, fat’).
- ▪ ‘If there is a will, I want to be in it’: a paraprosookian often used by comedians, producing a surprising end to a familiar utterance (in this case, ‘if there is a will, there is a way’) through transformational thinking by significantly altering part of the current conceptual space.
- ▪ ‘Silence of the stomachs. The serious lamb burger’: used in an advertisement promoting a new lamb burger, producing a new meaning and phrase through transformational and combinational thinking, transforming a well-known title of a movie (‘Silence of the lambs’) and combining ideas from remote disciplines (‘movie title’ versus ‘advertisement’).

In recent years, many have emphasized the importance of language play and creative language use in language learning and everyday language (for example . The need to use language to construct new meaning facilitates language learning by helping to stretch and destabilize learners’ language. It helps learners to retrieve less accessible language and explore and transform their language. It prevents cognitive fixation tendency and makes language memorable. The need to say something new (in particular meaning ‘new to self’, which speakers have not yet considered or ‘discovered’ and thus lack the language to express) makes us broaden our existing vocabulary and grammar, retrieve less accessible words and phrases, combine familiar words in unfamiliar ways, and develop complex grammar .

Applying a Vygotskian sociocultural framework, ‘creativity’ can be reinterpreted as a core fundamental component for learning., for example, notes that the ZPD—the point at which the learner moves from a reliance on others (other-regulation) to the independent capacity to perform or know for themselves (self-regulation) [. . .]—is not a zone in the sense of ‘place’, but a ‘creative, improvisational activity’.

It can be argued that ‘creativity’, i.e. the human ability and need to make new meaning and ‘do things that are beyond them’, can initiate the ZPD, helping learners to ‘stand a head taller than they are’ even in the absence of scaffolding by a more capable peer. Such a creative zone is important in language learning tasks, establishing the need for learners to say something new and to make new meaning that they have not yet formulated.

Among several conditions that can help to establish a creative zone and a creative desire, I will discuss two that could be set up to promote creativity in language learning tasks: multicultural experiences and constraints.

Multicultural experiences and creativity

Research has suggested a connection between creativity and multiculturalism (see, for example, . Being simultaneously exposed to different experiences can lead to cognitive flexibility and creativity. ‘Culture shock’ experienced in multicultural encounters can generate opportunities for creativity, allowing one to see new perspectives on familiar things. According to Leung *et al.* (ibid.: 172), multicultural exposure can destabilize and transform

. . . structured and routinized responses to the environment. Through multicultural experiences, people are also exposed to a range of behavioural and cognitive scripts for situations and problems. These new ideas, concepts, and scripts can be the inputs for the creative expansion processes because the more new ideas people have, the more likely they are to come up with novel combinations. (op. cit.: 172)

Creativity can be enhanced when one is exposed to multiple experiences either on a small scale (for example having different experiences in our daily life such as teaching versus playing sports) or on a large scale (for example living in different countries). In addition, multicultural experiences can vary from ‘little M[ulticultural]’ to ‘big M[ulticultural]’ and can facilitate combinational creativity where new ideas are produced by combining ideas from different remote disciplines.

An example of a ‘little M’ experience can be found in Excerpt 1¹ below, which uses the language of recipes to write about friendship:

Excerpt 1

Recipe poem: friendship

A drop of humour

A cup of kindness

A kilo of tolerance

Two pounds of understanding

A bunch of communication

A clove of laughter and silliness

A tablespoon of trouble-making.

Put them all in a blender

To make a mayonnaise of friendship.

(By Tan Bee Tin, Li Wei, and Hoai An)

(Reproduced from *Asian Poems for Young Readers* Volume 7 (2008) by A. Maley and J. Mukundan with permission from Pearson Longman Malaysia.)

Creative language use or language creativity through combinational thinking is manifested not only in creative writing, such as poems, but also in other domains of language use. For example, the following introduction from my own teaching portfolio (Excerpt 2) was written at the time of the 2012 Olympic Games. It demonstrates the creative use of language to articulate something new about my teaching philosophy, by combining two different experiences (Olympics versus teaching), and by combining words such as ‘gold medal’, ‘personal worst’, and ‘personal best’, which are frequently used during the Olympics, with ‘teachers’, ‘courses’, and ‘evaluation results’, the typical language of a teaching portfolio:

Excerpt 2

My teaching profile here will highlight the process of becoming an inspiring teacher with particular reference to a difficult course where I was at my ‘personal worst’ according to the course evaluation results compared to my other ‘personal best’ courses [. . .]. By comparing the course evaluation results I received recently in 2012 with the results I received in 2008 in that ‘personal worst’ course, I will reflect on how far I have come, the changes and improvement I have made, and how far I still need to go in my pursuit of the ‘great teacher’ gold medal.

Similarly, in Excerpt 3 below, students write about their most/least favourite teacher using the poetic form of acrostics:

Excerpt 3

Acrostics: most/least favourite teacher

View this table:

- [In this window](#)
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The strange and unfamiliar scenes one encounters in a foreign land (‘big M’ experiences) can also promote language creativity, enabling one to transform a familiar topic in an unfamiliar way. For example, a strange and unfamiliar scene of seeing shops selling coffins of small sizes along the streets of Hanoi, during a writing trip, led me to look at life in an unfamiliar way as follows (Excerpt 4):

Excerpt 4

A ready-made life

Even before my birth,

A name’s already given,

A career's already chosen,
A dress is already woven,
Coffins of different sizes
Are already carved—
Ready to carry my body
To earth no matter the age
I am destined to die.

(By Tan Bee Tin)

(Reproduced from *Asian Poems for Young Readers* Volume 7 (2008) by [A. Maley](#) and [J. Mukundan](#) with permission from Pearson Longman Malaysia.)

However, just the mere presence of multicultural experiences is not sufficient for creativity. Another condition, namely constraints, needs to be present to facilitate creativity and this is discussed in the next section.

[Previous Section](#)[Next Section](#)

Constraints and creativity

Constraints are defined as any limitation on freedom and choice such as rules, boundaries, and scarcity ([Joyce 2009](#)). Constraints are two sided or paired: one element of the constraint prevents searching in particular areas of the problem space, while the other element of the constraint promotes searching in other parts of the problem space ([Stokes 2006](#)). Therefore, for constraints to facilitate creativity, they need to direct the search for novel solutions while limiting the search among the known.

Thus, constraints desirable for creativity differ from the kind of limitations found in 'controlled' language learning tasks. In these 'controlled' tasks, limitations often prompt learners to review what they already know to express known meaning while limiting their search for riskier, unknown areas (for example using a given sentence structure 'there is . . ./there are . . .' to express what is seen in a picture or given as known information). In contrast, a constraint that leads to creativity needs to prompt learners to search among the unknown to construct new meaning, while limiting their search through what they already know.

The principled, imaginative use of constraints is important for creativity ([Boden op.cit.](#)). Some examples of such imaginative use include the selection of types of constraints imposed, as well as the manner or timing of constraint imposition (for example [Joyce op.cit.](#)). Finding new constraints to work with has been a feature of many famous creative works. In terms of language creativity, this involves not just satisfying existing constraints but also finding new constraints or transforming some or parts of existing constraints or rules to facilitate creativity.

In terms of timing, constraints do not need to be revealed at the beginning of a task as the presence of a clearly defined goal at this stage can backfire and is likely to activate known past experiences instead of broadening learners' language. There are two phases in a creative task: idea generation and idea exploration ([Finke, Ward, and Smith 1992](#)). In

the idea-generation phase, a social actor is presented with an ill-defined problem and is required to generate ideas or 'pre-inventive forms' without knowing the final outcome, the goal of the task, or the meaning those forms will take. In the idea-exploration phase, a new constraint is discovered or revealed, and the social actor is pushed to interpret the previously generated 'pre-inventive forms' in accordance with the new constraint, constructing new meaning and making meaning in retrospect. Example 1 illustrates this: The above creative task is different from a so-called 'meaningful' drill found in many ELT materials, where students are required to use the sentence structure to talk about familiar events (for example 'If I won a million dollars, I would . . .'). In such cases, the presence of a clearly defined goal as well as the use of a familiar topic could lead students to fall into a cognitive fixation tendency, retrieving known utterances and meaning (for example 'If I . . ., I would buy a house/travel around the world', etc.). We often hear teachers' complaints, such as 'I thought the students would come up with imaginative responses but the responses were very simple, safe, boring and the task was over very quickly!'. The need to use language to construct new, surprising meaning within constraints as in the creative task above can make language memorable. For example, students are more likely to remember new words such as 'hop', 'crack', and so on.

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