CREATIVITY AND CREATIVE TASKS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract

'Creativity', i.e. the human ability and need to make new meaning, can help learners to destabilise, explore and transform their language, a desirable goal in language teaching. In this talk, I propose a 'creative' view of language as a tool for creating new ideas and meaning. In order to increase the learner's desire to explore and retrieve less accessible language within and beyond their Zone of Proximal Development, I will propose two conditions for creative language learning tasks: 1. creating the need to say something new and 2. setting up constraints in language learning tasks in order to encourage learners to explore and transform their language. Too much freedom can restrict possibilities for learners to explore and broaden their language repertoire as learners may retrieve safe options and make familiar choices.

Key words: creativity, creative view of language, zone of proximal development

1. What is 'creativity'? Why is it important for language learning?

Creativity, according to cognitive psychological researchers, is the ability to produce new valuable ideas and involves the use of various creative processes or thinking types such as exploratory, combinational and transformational thinking (e.g. Boden, 2001). Exploratory thinking is the ability to generate new ideas and explore all the possibilities within the current conceptual space, using a certain set of rules. Combinational thinking is the ability to produce new valuable ideas by combining existing ideas in an unusual way. Transformational thinking, on the other hand, is the manipulation, transformation or the changing of some existing rules of the current conceptual space so as to produce new ideas.

Creativity, i.e. the ability to produce new ideas or the need to say something new, plays an important part in language learning and autonomy. According to complex dynamic theory of language, the need to say something new leads us to stretch and explore our language, which in turn leads to the development of complex grammar and complex language. 'Language grows in complexity over time to deal with complex tasks' (Lakkaraju et al 2008). Linguistic signs are 'continually created to meet new needs and circumstances.' (Toolan, 2003). This view of language applies to the evolution of language in the history of mankind as well as the development of complex language in children – children's language grows in complexity along with the increase in their new experience about the world. The new experience they encounter gives children as well as adults alike a desire to explore and transform their language.

In this regards, creativity (i.e. the human need and ability to produce and say something new) involves making creative choices with and taking control over our language and plays an important part in language learning.

2. How can creativity (the desire to say something new) be set up in our language learning tasks?

The next important question to ask is 'which particular features of language learning tasks can create a desire in our students to take control over their language, making creative choices, exploring linguistic utterances in the process of maturing, and transforming their existing language?'

I will propose the term 'creative tasks' and the following task features to promote creativity for language learning and autonomy: focus on unknown/new meaning rather than on known meaning; and disciplined and imaginative use of constraints to broaden possibilities

Despite the claim to focus on meaning, many language learning tasks have focused on 'known meaning' rather than 'unknown meaning'. Students are often required to use language to talk about familiar, known topics. Information to be communicated is often pre-given either in the form of verbal or non-verbal mode (e.g. pictures). This can be found in the popular information gap-task or the story telling task, widely used in both language teaching and research.

In such tasks, the information to be communicated is pre-given and known to one student who needs to transfer the knowledge to another student. Even though the information is concealed from the other student, the fact that the information is given to one student creates a 'known' situation in a way. Such known situation often results in students finishing the task using safe, familiar utterances instead of exploring and transforming their language. This phenomenon can be referred to as 'signal redundancy' (Smith 2008).

i.e. lack of desire to learn and invent a complex signal or a complex language due to lack of new experience or new unknown meaning to construct. In other words, the need for students to explore and transform language is made redundant because the meaning to be communicated is already known.

As creativity researchers have noted, it is 'constraint' rather than 'freedom' that facilitate creativity. Constraint, in cognitive psychology, is two-folded: one part restricts search in the known area while the other part encourages search in the unknown area. An imaginative and disciplined use of constraint is required for creativity. I will propose the following procedure for 'creative tasks' (see Tan Bee Tin, 2013):

1. Idea generation phase:
- Generating ideas and forms without knowing what they will be used for (the goal of the task is ill-defined so as to prevent students from deliberately rearranging their vocabulary and sentences to achieve the outcome, i.e. to prevent them from the cognitive fixation tendency)

2. Constraints revealed or discovered:
- Constraints (formal rules and semantic rules) are revealed or discovered

3. Idea exploration phase:
- Exploring ideas generated in the idea generation phase within the constraints imposed. This encourages students to use exploratory, combinational and transformational creativity (combining ideas and words in unfamiliar ways, transforming their linguistic and conceptual space in the process of doing so, making creative choices with language and ideas).

Using this procedure of imaginative disciplined use of constraints, we can transform a language learning task into a creative task, from a focus on known meaning to a focus to unknown meaning.

3. Conclusion

Imaginative and disciplined use of constraints can help students to test their linguistic as well as conceptual boundaries, to exercise creative autonomy with their language and ideas. Constraint can lead to unpredictable novel outcome and creative autonomy.

Certain features of creative tasks can encourage students to make creative choices and broaden their linguistic and conceptual boundaries. Several such task circumstances are: focusing on the need to construct unknown meaning or the need to say something new, and the disciplined and imaginative use of constraints.

Learning is about providing space for new meaning to emerge: space in which old meaning is transformed. Learning is about providing space for learners to retrieve, explore, combine and transform their knowledge and space for new meaning to emerge.

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