

Promoting Creative Tasks in the Foreign Language Classroom

外国語授業における創造的なタスクの推進

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Abstract

This paper considers different ways to integrate creativity research that has been done in the field of psychology and cognitive science into the foreign language classroom. Creativity is important for the development of the individual and the overall prosperity of the society, but also is crucial for the language learner for language itself is highly creative, playful, and imaginative. Three types of creativity tasks are explored in this paper: divergent thinking tasks, problem solving tasks, and metaphorical thinking tasks. The aim is not to replace any existing method for teaching a foreign language, but rather to challenge the students to think more insightfully about the world and make them more aware of the everyday creativity found in natural language.

Keywords: creativity, foreign language education, metaphor, divergent thinking

Introduction

Ever since Guilford (1950) addressed the American Psychological Association and called for psychologists to stop neglecting the important human trait of creativity, research into this field has steadily grown. Creativity is important both for the mental health of the individual and the overall success of the society. Research has shown that creative skills such as problem solving can actually help the individual cope with various stresses that one encounters in life, the ability to adapt to new situations, and an overall positive mental health (Cropley A. J., 1990) (Richards, 1990) (Carson & Runco, 1999). On a macro level, many societies have recently looked towards creativity as a key resource to the success of the nation (Florida, 2002) (Tan, 2000). Consequently creativity is now regarded as an important skill to develop at school and should be promoted in the classroom.

While creativity has been notoriously difficult to define, Plucker, Beghetto, and Dow (2004) have provided a thorough conception of this term by defining creativity as “the interaction among *aptitude, process, and environment* by which an individual or group produces a *perceptible product* that is both *novel* and *useful* as defined within a *social context*.” (p. 90 emphasis in original). Certain cultural values have been pointed out to hinder and stifle creativity such as conformity (Lubart, 1990), conservatism (Dollinger, 2007), and authoritarianism (Rubenstein, 2003). Often these values though at the same time are promoted in the foreign language classroom environment where students are expected to be conservative and conform to prescriptive grammar rules. Where language learning is about repetition or answering cursory questions about one’s hobbies and likes. Yet, learning a foreign language should be about learning another culture, broadening one’s thoughts, and challenging oneself to step beyond the familiar and become more curious about the world. This interaction with another culture even at a societal level can have positive influence on the creativity of a nation, as Simonton (1997), using a historiometric method of

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research, was able to show that the most innovative and creative periods in Japanese history occurred when there was an influx of foreign ideas and peoples. Even on an individual level, students who have spent time studying overseas have performed higher on creativity measurements (Leung, Maddux, Galinsky, & Chiu, 2008) (Maddux, 2009). All this points to the fact that foreign language classrooms should be an ideal place to promote and develop the students' creative potential. In this short paper I will explore some possible ways to bring in certain aspects from creativity research into the language classroom.

Divergent Thinking Tests

One popular way of measuring creativity is through divergent thinking tests. Though it should be noted that divergent thinking and creativity are not the same thing, but divergent thinking is one component of creativity and creativity as a whole is made up of multiple components (Amabile, 1996) (Batey & Furnham, 2006). Guilford (1968) stated, "Most of our problems solving in everyday life involves divergent thinking. Yet in our educational practices, we tend to emphasize teaching students how to find conventional answers" (p.8). This is still very much true in foreign language classrooms. It is important to separate these two thinking styles where convergent thinking is the ability to arrive at one right answer compared to divergent thinking, which is "cognition that leads in various directions" (Runco, 1999).

Paul Torrance (1966, 2008) developed the most widely used divergent thinking tests called the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (TTCT). This test has two forms; one is a figural form and the other verbal. One subtest of the verbal form that has been widely used and is well-known throughout the world is the "Unusual Uses" subtest, which asks the participants to come up with as many uses as possible for an object like a brick, paperclip, and so on. One subtest of the figural form that can be easily adapted into the classrooms as a mini task is a "Picture Completion" subtest, where students are asked to complete a picture (consisting of 4 straight lines) and provide a title for it. The pictures students have drawn from these four simple lines have varied greatly from a banana to a crooked cityscape to a skier to the ones provided in the example below (See Figure 1). The most common pictures have been a house and a pen or pencil. The students are then asked to write a very brief story about the picture or why they drew this picture or how they came up with this idea for the picture. Once students have completed the task, the students get into groups and share with each other their pictures and stories. The point of this activity is not only linguistic, but also an attempt to increase student interest in the subject for interest in the material can have a positive affect on student grades and cause them to use deeper studying strategies (Schiefele, Krapp, & Winteler, 1992) (Krapp, 1999).

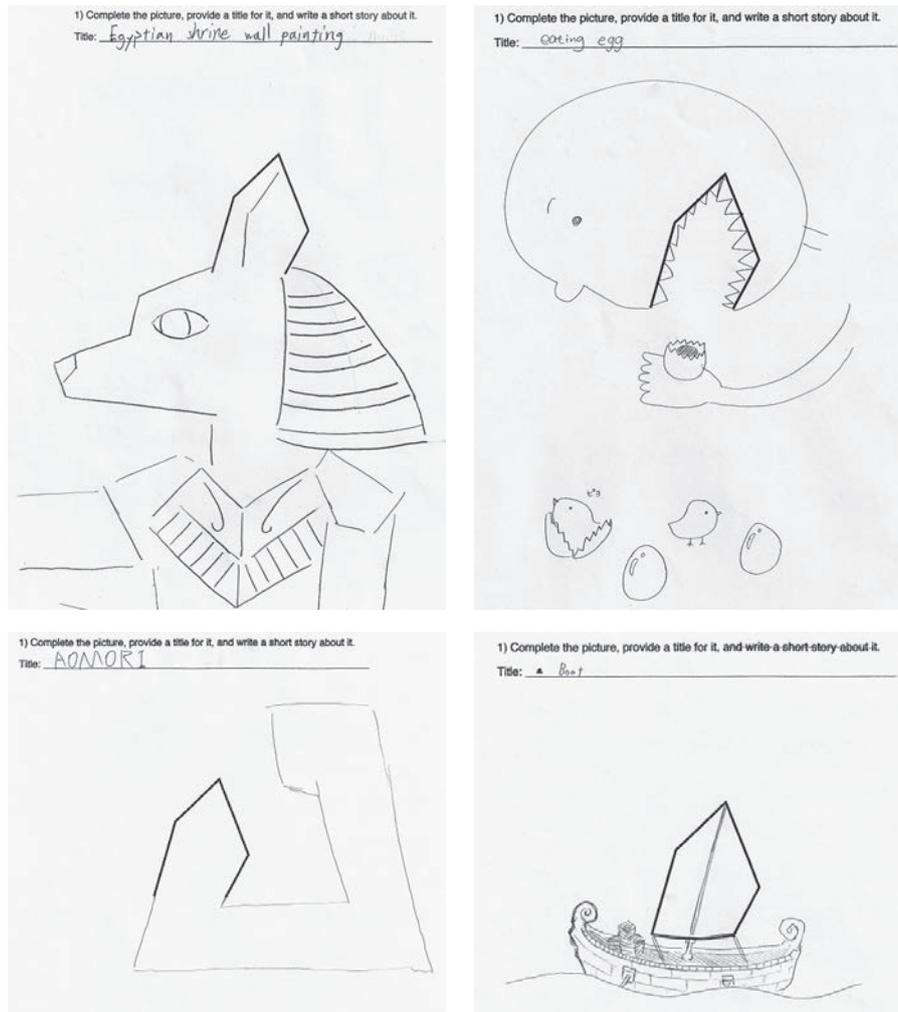


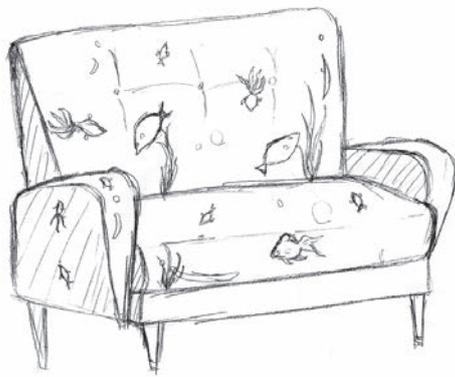
Figure 1: Examples from the Picture Completion Task

Another subtest example that can be readily used in a foreign language classroom is a “Just Suppose” task. Here students are presented with an improbable situation and have to think of possible consequences. Possible situations though not limited to these are: a meteor is on target to hit the earth, scientists have created an invisible cloak, or engineers have developed a phone robot that can quickly and accurately translate any language. This can be done in pairs or small groups and turned into a game by counting the number of unique and original consequences that each group has come up with. In the literature on divergent thinking tests, there are generally four aspects used to assess the test taker’s creativity namely: fluency (number of responses), originality (uniqueness of responses), flexibility (number and uniqueness of categories of responses), and elaboration (detail of response). Other subtests include: guessing causes for the action in a picture, asking as many questions as possible about a picture, and ways to improve a product. (See Kaufman, Plucker, & Baer, 2008 for more detailed information about these tasks)

Problem Finding Creative Tasks

Another important part of creativity is ideational thought, or the ability to come up with many ideas to a problem. Finke, Ward, and Smith (1992) developed a theory of creative cognition using a Geneplore model, which is a coined word blended from the words generative and exploratory, that attempts to explain creativity not as a single entity but as a cluster of cognitive processes. The generative process is the process whereby one comes up with many potential creative ideas and the exploratory process expands on these ideas. This generating of ideas and

then exploring in more detail a few of these ideas can be adapted into a heuristic homework task for the students. The students are asked to think about their daily lives and something inconvenient about it and then try to devise an invention that might improve this situation. They must draw the invention, as well as, explain what it is and how it works (See Figure 2). Students then present their inventions to the class. These tasks can involve other themes such as poetry, designing a collage, or coming up with a new smartphone application. Students are encouraged to think creatively and try to generate many ideas at first before exploring one that they find interesting or important. These types of tasks compared to the divergent thinking tests revolve around more real-life creativity and have been viewed within the field of creativity researches to be more valid and reasonable representation of a creative product (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995) (Amabile, 1996).



Invention

Today, I want to talk about my invention. If you breed fish, you always want to watch fish near by. In case, my invention is very useful. My invention is a mixed aquarium and sofa. This sofa is aquarium. There is fish in this sofa. You only sit down. You can always watch fish. You will be relax. If you breed colorful fish, the view is very beautiful. This is wonderful interior. If you have this sofa in your house, you become the most popular person in neighborhood. In addition, your life will be happy.



Magical Snow Boots

Good morning and a Happy New Year!
 Today, I want to tell you about my idea. I came up with a good idea for snow country people. These boots are unusual. The bottom of the boots gives off the heat, and melts the snow or the ice. So, the boots prevent you from slipping and falling down. Therefore, if they exist realistically, I think that they are very helpful to people in a snow country.
 I wish someone develop them someday.
 Thank you for listening to my speech.

Figure 2: Examples from the Problem Finding Creative Task

Metaphorical Thinking

In this last section I would like to address one of the more important though often overlooked parts of the foreign language classroom and that is how to address the concept of metaphor in the target language, as a way to improve student creativity. Metaphor for a long time was considered a peripheral part of language and therefore of little consequence to the foreign language learner, but a movement away from this classical view has been steadily growing since the 1980's and more recently metaphors are viewed as essential and ubiquitous (Paprotté & Dirven, 1985) in language and not only language but also thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003). Metaphors are such an integral part of language, Cameron and Low (1999) suggest that having knowledge of them is essential to using language and may actually be crucial to acquiring it. This importance of metaphors in language naturally is not restricted to learning a first language, but also critical for learning a second language for it contributes to

various language skills such as sociolinguistic, illocutionary, textual, and grammatical competencies (Littlemore & Low, 2006). Any teacher that attempts to utilize authentic material in the classroom is often confronted with the common dilemma of, “How do I get my students to think more metaphorically in the foreign language, so they can understand this text?” The following quotes from an online article taken from baby boomers talking about their dire financial situations demonstrate just how important metaphors are to natural, everyday language.

- (1) *“Yes, withdrawing funds helped me jump over my financial hurdle at the time ... it was a financial setback. Twenty-five years later, I still kick myself.”*
- (2) *“Creditors were calling me daily and my good credit rating took a nosedive ... The light at the end of the tunnel is getting a little brighter now ...” (Sprinkle, 2013)*

In cognitive semantics, conceptual metaphors are usually written with capital letters to distinguish them from the above linguistic metaphors. Looking at the quotes above, we can find such conceptual metaphors as FORWARD MOVEMENT IS PROGRESS, (FINANCIAL) LIFE IS A JOURNEY, DOWN IS LESS, and SEEING IS KNOWING. Thus when one subsequently falls behind, they are not making progress, which in the evaluative sense is a negative outcome. On the road to wealth and a comfortable retirement life, one may encounter certain impediments like a hurdle that may block one from reaching one’s goal in a timely and smooth manner. When your credit takes a “nosedive”, your credit score is quantitatively less than it was before and has become less in a quick and out of control manner. In a tunnel, there is darkness, not being able to see and therefore not knowing what will happen, not knowing how you will survive your current situation. This lack of knowledge leads to despair and hopelessness, but the light is hope for it brings with it knowledge and clarity. The embodied act of physically kicking yourself is a metaphorical gesture for the abstract concept of regret. It works much the same way as “cross my heart” is for a promise or “his comment left me scratching my head” is for confusion. Where the physical gestural act is metaphorically extended to some socially complex situation.

Metaphors, as can be seen from the above examples, require some creativity from the reader to interpret their meanings. Metaphors may exist on a cline based on how novel they are to how conventionalized they are to the reader. The more novel metaphors, naturally, would require more creative processing to interpret the meaning. For foreign language students, one would have to assume that most metaphors in the target language would tend to be more novel since the metaphors have not had a chance to become conventionalized for the learners. Exposing students to metaphors early on in their learning of the language is an essential part to becoming more competent with it. One easy way to bring metaphors into the classroom is through the emotions. Physiological states such as heat are often extended to the emotion of anger while coldness with fear. Verticality is often exploited by the emotional states of happiness and sadness. This could be done through simple exercises that asks students to reflect on these emotions and then provide them with common vocabulary or idiomatic language that are commonly used to express these states such as “boiling over” or “simmer down” for anger, “blue” or “down” for sadness, “up” or “on cloud nine” for happiness, “cold feet” or “frozen stiff” for fear, and so on. Most often many of these will have some cross-linguistic similarities since they are not so much conceptually framed by some element of culture, but instead a physiological change from experiencing such an emotion.

Another approach to bringing metaphors into the classroom in a more creative way is to use visual metaphors (Forceville, 1994), especially the ones found in advertisements to get students to find some similarities between two unlike things. Birdsell (2013a) presented different ways to bring metaphors into the classroom, for example, using pictorial representations as stimuli to get students to start thinking metaphorically and possibly lead to critical discussions on the topic. For instance, The World Wildlife Federation provides many good metaphorical images.

One such image is the depiction of a forest in the shape of lungs and the destruction of it. There are at least two metaphors here, the earth is a living thing and trees are the lungs to this living thing. This could lead to a class discussion about deforestation and the importance of conservation. Metaphors in pictorials can both visually provide cues to the student and assist them in making the connection between the two semantically disparate items in the metaphor.

Metaphors in the classroom can have multiple benefits for the students learning a second language. Firstly, they can enhance their overall linguistic competency with the language. Secondly metaphors provide a springboard to discussions on various current event topics for they often are highly evaluative in nature. Finally and most importantly for this paper, metaphors provide an opportunity for the students to be more creative with the language.

Conclusion

This paper provides a brief review of some possible ways to introduce creativity in the foreign language classroom and the importance of creativity for language learning for research has shown that creative individuals are more intrinsically motivated to learn (Birdsell, 2013b), have a greater willingness to exert effort (Cropley A., 1997) and are more open to new experiences (McRae, 1987), which are all important traits to learning. Though it should be stated that these activities are not meant to replace any formal teaching method, but could possibly be integrated into existing teaching material. Creativity in the classroom has incessantly intrigued teachers while at the same has also carried with it a negative stigma for creative individuals have often been labeled as acting in a deviant and/or defiant way to proper and good classroom behavior. Trying to implement creative tasks into the classroom may disrupt the teacher's control over the class for it naturally promotes the exploration of the unknown, which may in turn lead to unpredictable classes. Though the potential role of creativity in the foreign language classroom should not be underestimated for creativity is the learning process by which unexpected links between two discrepant elements come together, which may assist learners in developing metaphorical competence in the foreign language. While at the same time provides students practical skills like learning to be more innovative, which is of great importance to business organizations effectiveness and survival (Tellis, Prabhu, & Chandy, 2009) (Dreu, Baas, & Nijstad, 2012)

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