

# Creativity in the language classroom

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Creativity is currently a topic of interest in language teaching and beyond (e.g. Carter, 2004; Pope, 2004). In UK education, the 'creativity' encouraged in classrooms in the 70s and early 80s was followed by a tightening and enforcing of the curriculum and school inspection in the late 80s and 90s. This process has succeeded in raising achievement, but there is a feeling that it is again time to loosen up our ideas and think about creativity in learning. Among others, the writer Philip Pullman has argued strongly that the English curriculum stifles creativity by restricting pupils to reading particular texts (often only parts of texts) and to writing in particular forms. In this article, I examine what we might mean by 'creativity' and give some examples of creativity in the learning of English.

## 1 Creativity, knowledge and expertise

First, we step back from language and look at an arena that has always been associated with creativity: art, and in particular, painting. For an artist, creativity is the use of art **to express your own meanings**, to "paint your truth".

A range of artistic **resources** are available to express meaning, including different media, colours, shapes, and composition. Over years of practice and training, an artist builds up **expertise** – from repeated use of the resources of art, you come to know what is possible with the materials and develop the skills to make things happen with them. The best artists also bring the rather mysterious gift of 'talent', which seems to include a neurological tendency to see the world particularly vividly.

Art does not happen in a socio-cultural vacuum, and artists develop their knowledge and skills through encounters with the work of other artists, living and dead. At the same time, the value placed on art by a society influences the opportunities available to become an artist and to become commercially successful.

- **Creativity is personal, technical, and socio-cultural.**

In **the process of creating** a particular painting, the artist's skills interact with the meanings that the artist wants to express. Rather than knowing before beginning what the finished picture will look like, the artist will come to the task with sketches and ideas. But it is in the doing of the picture, that it takes shape – for example, the way the paint goes from the brush to the paper at one point may influence the texture of the painting; the effect of colour in one part may influence the use of colour in some other part of the picture.

- **The creative process is dynamic and adaptive.**

'Happy accidents' may occur in the process of painting as an action produces an unexpected result that the

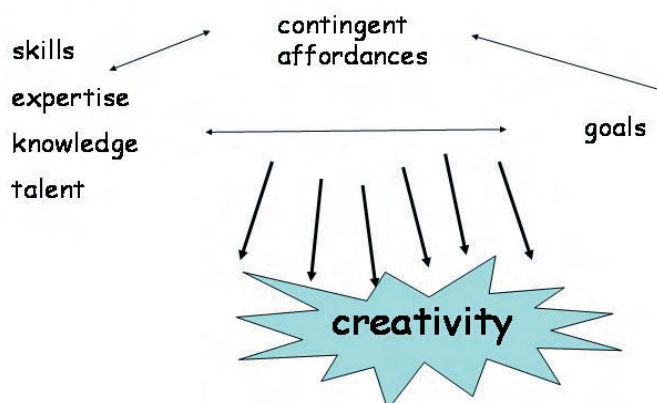
artist uses productively. For example, a drip of paint may look like a tear drop and inspire a previously unthought idea, or a new juxtaposition of colours may be unexpectedly striking. The creative artist will:

- notice the opportunity
- seize the opportunity, rather than let it pass
- exploit the opportunity to express something new or in a new way.
- These opportunities that happen in the process of creating are called **contingent affordances**.

I suggest that all acts of creativity make use of, or create, contingent affordances.

Think of another type of creative situation – a football match. The creative football player makes use of contingent affordances in a match. He is the player who notices opportunities and has the skills and expertise to take advantage of them.

- **Returning to the language classroom, I want to argue that learners and teachers can apply their expertise to make use of contingent affordances, and that this is the basis of creativity in the language classroom.**

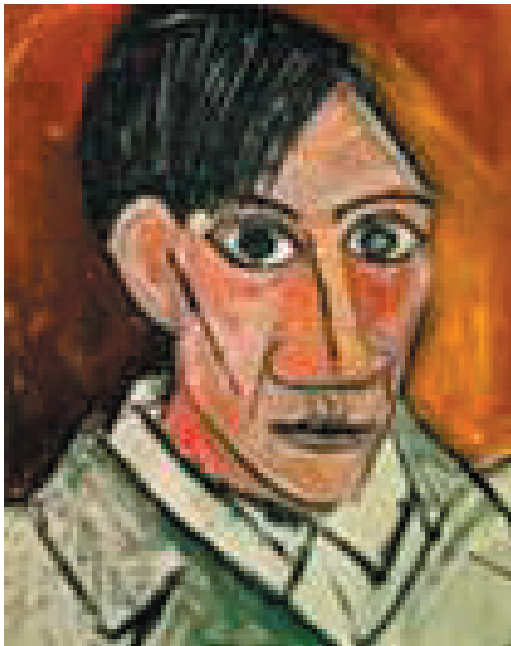


## 2 Sources of contingent affordances

Contingent affordances are opportunities that arise in the course of activity. I suggest that there are (at least) four sources of contingent affordances:

- similarities
- differences
- gaps
- juxtapositions.

To explain these ideas, I will use the following picture, painted by Picasso:



## 2.1 Similarities

Similarities may be of various types including:

**resemblances** – one thing looks like another or acts in a similar way. Notice how many of the lines in the picture are at a **similar** angle: the lines of the nose, cheek and chin are parallel to the lines of the shirt collar, and on the man's right side, the shirt collar is parallel to the coat collar. Picasso has deliberately emphasised the similarity, for example, in making the left side of the man's forehead parallel to his right cheek bone. The lack of reality is traded for emphasis.

**allusions** – something acts to remind us of something else. This might be an explicit allusion or just a reminder or a suggestion – behind the man's right shoulder is a bright patch in the dark background which suggests a window or door.

**associations** – there is no concrete connection but one is made nevertheless. For example, we might remember the place where we first saw this picture and the people we were with at the time.

## 2.2 Differences

Partly because of the emphasised similarities, the contrasts or differences become stronger: the round shapes of the eyes and the nose strike the observer because they are different from the straight lines all around them. The difference in dark and light between the two sides of the painting create the effect of light and shade.

## 2.3 Gaps

Absences – what is not happening or is not present – may offer opportunities for creativity. Artists use this in the idea of 'negative spaces', the empty spaces around a shape. These gaps also have shapes, and sometimes focusing on the negative spaces can help the artist better create the shape. In the Picasso painting, the negative spaces at the sides of the man's head are very strong; part of the force of the picture comes from how

he fills the frame right to the top.

Gaps in the opposing team's coverage of the football field are a crucial affordance for the creative footballer. He looks for a gap through which the ball can be sent.

## 2.4 Juxtapositions

Juxtaposition is the placing of things next to each other. At several places in the picture, Picasso has created impact through placing different things side by side: the red on the man's neck is more striking because it is next to the greenish-white of the shirt; at the edge of his nose, a round line meets a straight line, emphasising both. There is some poignancy created by the juxtaposition of textures in the bottom left of the picture where the rough coat is next to the soft shirt, and the materials are next to the human texture of the man's skin.

## 3 Creative use of language

I now show how contingent affordances and creativity show themselves in children's language use.

### 3.1 Saying what you mean as a beginner in a foreign language

The first example comes from data collected in a class of 8 year old beginners in Japan by Yumi Ohashi (2005). The teacher is introducing a singing activity and pupil P1 uses Japanese to comment on this idea (English translation in italics). When the teacher asks "Are you ready?", the pupils respond in chorus using a phrase they clearly know well: "Yes, we are". However, two pupils (P2 and P3) respond differently – and using their limited English creatively:

T: let's sing Doh Re Mi. OK?  
 P1: really, do we have to do it every time?  
 ...  
 T: are you ready?  
 PP: [loudly] yes we are  
 P2: **yes we no**  
 P3: **no it isn't**  
 T: good (Ohashi, 2005)

P2 tries to express a negative form of the phrase yes we are, using the negative marker *no* instead of *aren't*. P3 expresses the same meaning in a different way. He picks a formulaic phrase – *no it isn't* - that he may have learnt in other contexts, e.g. *is it red? no it isn't*.

Both pupils are being creative in finding ways to express disagreement through their language knowledge, even though it is very restricted. P2 uses similarity, whereas P3 uses difference or contrast.

There is something playful about this exchange too – they both try to say this in English rather than using their shared native language. It is as if they want to stay in the classroom 'game' by using English, but want to show they might still have their own opinion about singing. Very simple language hides complex processes of meaning and expressing ideas.

### 3.2 Inferring meaning

Inferring meaning from what other people say and do is the basic creative leap across the gap between oneself and another person that underpins all language use. We

are often only aware of this process at work when it goes wrong! An example of this from Korean classroom was given in Cameron (2003a).

The teacher introduced the phrases *I like* and *I don't like* with the vocabulary of food. Children practised questions and answers like *Do you like pizza? Yes, I do. Do you like bananas? No, I don't.* A few weeks later, the phrases were re-used, but this time with the names of the children's friends: *Do you like Su Won?* Some of the children were surprised and quite horrified at this question... they had inferred the meaning as relating to food and taste, so could not see how it might fit with their friends! The children's misunderstanding shows us something of their understanding – how they inferred some of the meaning of *like* from the food words juxtaposed with *like* in the examples the teacher gave first.

Students in classrooms are always inferring meaning, and will use all the clues that the teacher or textbook provides. To fill the gap between the words and their meaning, students will use information from similarities, differences and juxtapositions.

### 3.3 Subversion

Subversion is making one act look like another, without being found out. It requires noticing similarities across a gap between what is happening and what you want to happen.

In an example from Cameron (2001), an 11 year old Norwegian boy subverts the task given by the teacher to describe an arctic animal, and in the process, creates a good learning opportunity for himself. The starting point for the task was to write down the name of an animal on the board. The first student wrote:

fox                      reindeer

and was then asked to speak about the arctic fox. He struggled to produce some simple phrases, needing a lot of help from the teacher:

*it's a fox  
little and white  
on TV yes*

The boy in question wrote on the board *budgie* and then proceeded to talk about his own pet budgerigar, using more complex language than other pupils had managed:

*she can have many colours  
it's a bird  
and she talks a lot  
I read in a book and it's ..it says it's a little parrot  
but I don't know where they come from*

What is important about this language is not just its complexity but that it the boy is working at the edge of his competence, pushing himself to express his own meanings. Like a footballer reaching for a difficult ball or kicking a difficult shot, he strains his resources to meet the challenge that he has set himself by subverting the task.

Classrooms tend to resist subversion since the whole activity of schooling rests on students sharing acceptance of the power of the teacher to organise events.

However, the examples show that there are positive forms of subversion in which children show us how they can go beyond the task. Effective teaching might make use of this to stretch learners.

### 3.4 Reminders

A special kind of similarity is where something in the real world reminds you of something not present but in your memory.

The most common reminder for young learners would probably be the sound of English and the sound of an L1 word. Ohashi's Japanese learners commented on English words that sounded like words in English and in Japanese:

for example --> 4 *apple*  
cucumber --> *cucum babah* (old woman)

There is no connection at the level of meaning here, just of surface form. If meaning were added, these kinds of nonsense but amusing reminders could help in memorising vocabulary.

There is not space here to show the many other ways in which similarities, differences, gaps and juxtapositions contribute to contingent affordances and to creativity. It is hoped, however, that these examples will prompt readers to notice children's creativity in their daily classroom activities – and their own creative potential as teachers.

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