Guided and Unguided Acrostics Tasks

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Abstract

Creative writing tasks have long played a role in ESL classrooms. Differentiated in the levels of formal constrain, creative writing tasks shape and reshape learners' language from syntacticaland lexical, paradigmatical, and syntagmatical aspects. Tin (2010) looked at two types of creative writing tasks: acrostics, which had strict formal constraints, and similes, which had less strict constraints. When compared to similes, acrostics forced learners to consider both form and meaning at the same time, resulting in greater options for complex syntax and creative language use. These findings imply that such activities serve to add funs in the ESL classroom while also improving learning. Due to a lack of vocabulary and experience, learners with limited English ability may struggle with these types of form-oriented play exercises. The goal of this essay is to see if teachers can provide appropriate direction to help an unskilled student complete a creative writing task successfully. In this research, a pre-teaching task involving the use of mental image is designed to aid learners with pre-intermediate level in ESL classrooms. As a result, it is suggested that under the designed guidance of teachers, learners were able to improve their performance in creating pictorial scenes and expanding the use of lexis.

Keywords

ESL; English level; Creative writing.

1. Introduction

How to use creative tasks in ESL classrooms is a popular topic and covered a variety of types and forms (e.g. Pomerantz & Bell, 2007; Tin, 2010 and Kurtz, 2011; Ulger, 2018). In the study of language creativity and co-emergence of form and meaning in creative writing tasks, Tin (2010) investigated two types of creative writing tasks, namely acrostics, which presented high formal constrains, and similes, which has looser constrains. Acrostics, compared to similes, pushed the students to think of the form and meaning at the same time, and led to more opportunities for the emergence of complex syntax and creative language use. These results suggest that such tasks might help to add flavour to the ESL classroom while increasing learning. However, the learner with limited English proficiency may encounter many difficulties with this kind form-oriented play tasks due to their lack of vocabulary and experience in performing such tasks. Thus, the purpose of this essay is to explore whether teachers can provide effective guidance to lead the untrained student to successfully carry out a creative writing task.

In this essay, it is assumed that leading the students to discover their imaginary world before performing the task would assist in reducing their cognitive load during task performance, and, thus, result in a better outcome. A rationale for this is that mental imagery plays an important role in the cognitive process of producing creative language (Intons-Peterson, 1993). An un-guided and a guided task of acrostics will be examined and compared. The impact of teacher-guidance in the pre-task stage on creative process and the outcome will also be discussed. This essay can be seen as a continuation of Tin's (2010) study, however, here the aim is to practically apply and assess form-oriented play tasks with high constrains in ESL classrooms.

2. Literature review

2.1. Creativity as A Cognitive Process

In the current study of creativity there are three mainstream approaches to investigate creativity, namely the inherent approach, the sociocultural approach and the cognitive approach (Maybin & Pearce, 2006). The inherent approach focuses on the ability of writers in playing with language (e.g. Crystal, 1996). The sociocultural approach studies the social and ideological factors in creativity (e.g. Eagleton, 1983). And the cognitive approach emphasizes that creativity is a cognitive process, and different types of thinking are involved in such process (Zawada, 2009). The process may refer to the mental or conceptual making of new meaning (e.g. Ward et al, 1997), "transforming one's current linguistic and conceptual world" (Tin, 2010, pp. 216).

Finke (1996) identified the structured and unstructured aspects of creative thinking. Structured thinking and imagination greatly involves the typical and salient features of familiar objects and forms (e.g. the process of generating), while the unstructured thinking is normally impulsive, reactive to the current existing, and spontaneous. The later spontaneous unstructured thinking is best exemplified by chaotic thinking, and its contrary is represented by ordered thinking. Another classification offered by Boden (1996) distinguished the forms of thinking in three ways, i.e. combinational creativity, exploratory creativity and transformational creativity.

2.2. Mental Imagery and the Cognitive Process

Mental imagery, is defined as "the mental invention or recreation of an experience that in at least some respects resembles the experience of actually perceiving an object or an event, either in conjunction with, or in the absence of, direct sensory stimulation" (Finke, 1989, pp. 2). Based on Shepard's (1978) hypothesis, Intons-Peterson (1993) summarized that imagery has special effectiveness in creativity. Mental imagery, e.g. creating mental images, not only helps someone regain particular features and incidental details from the unconscious memory, but also contributes to the discovery of emergent features (Finke, 1996).

Based on the above studies and theories, I assume that a pre-task which aims at helping the students discover their mental images may make a difference on their subsequent performance in the acrostics task. This is also the core question of this essay hopes to answer. In the following sections, the following issues will be focused:

Will the teacher-led pre-task have an impact on the students' thinking process while doing the tasks?

Will the teacher-led pre-task have an impact on the students' creative product, e.g. the language used and the content described in the acrostics.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants are three male and a female pre-intermediate level non-native English speaking Chinese students from a private language institute in Auckland. They are currently enrolled in the pre-intermediate class of a university English preparation program. Three of the participants are 18 years old and one is 21. All the participants had English as a compulsory course during their junior and senior secondary school education in China. Their study in New Zealand started around 2 months ago. Informal conversation before the research began suggested that the participants never received any kind of special training related to creative writing. The purpose of the research was introduced before the task was carried out and the participants' consent was obtained. All interaction with the participants was audio recorded.

Food and drinks were also provided to help them relax before starting the tasks. The procedure of their completing the tasks was audio recorded, and all the writing drafts were collected.

3.2. Task Introduction

The warm-up activity and the main task were adopted from Tin's (2010) research (See Appendix 1). In the warm-up activity, the participants were required to read three examples of acrostics, and then to find out the rules of creating an acrostic. In the main task, four keywords ('school', 'joy', 'teacher' and 'holiday') were provided for the participants to work on and create the acrostics. The participants were divided into two pairs. After the warm-up activity, Pair 1 created acrostics with the words 'teacher' and 'joy' directly. In the following task the students receive teacher-led pre-task planning before they do the task creating acrostics with 'school' and 'holiday'. Pair 2, on the other hand, got the teacher-led task with the words 'school' and 'holiday' after the warm-up activity, and then they created acrostics with the words 'teacher' and 'joy' with no teacher-led support. Considering their English level, they were allowed to ask questions related to the word spelling.

The task procedures of the two pairs is shown in the following table:

Table 1. Task sequence of Pair 1 & Pair 2

Pair 1	Pair 2
warm-up activity: read the examples and find the rules	warm-up activity: read the examples and find the rules
no pre-task	pre-task: 'school' and 'holiday'
acrostics creation: 'teacher' and 'joy'	acrostics creation: 'school' and 'holiday'
pre-task: 'school' and 'holiday'	no pre-task
acrostics creation: 'school' and 'holiday'	acrostics creation: 'teacher' and 'joy'

The teacher led pre-task stage was designed based on previous studies of mental imagery. Three steps were included. Firstly, the teacher elicited the students' mental images in reaction to a word. The students were required to close their eyes and imagine scenes with the word given by the teacher, and then report. The teacher helped them by making notes on the board. Secondly, the teacher led the students to put emotion into the subject, by using questions such as 'What do you like about school? And what do you dislike?' In the last step, students brainstormed the lexis to describe their mental images related to the subjects, and organized the lexis according to each letter of the key word. The teacher helped making notes on the board. After the whole task sequence was completed, the students filled out questionnaires to report how they did the tasks and how they felt about the tasks (See Appendix 4).

3.3. Data Analysis

The interaction within the pairs was audio-recorded and transcribed (see Appendix 2). The wordlists from the brainstorm section were collected (see Appendix 3), as well as the written drafts and the completed acrostics. The process of creating the acrostics is analyzed based on Finke's (1996) classification of the thinking process, i.e. chaotic thinking and ordered thinking. The outcome, that is, the acrostics, is examined from the decisions made at the different levels of creativity, which includes the phonetics level, the rhythm level, the lexical choices level, the semantics level, the syntactic level, and the narrative level (Gervás, 2010).

4. Result

4.1. The Unguided Tasks – Incoherent Sentences Making

The process of creating the acrostics independently may be summarized as a process of sentences making, which is dominant by chaotic thinking. The most explicit rule of acrostics is that the students have to start every line by using the letters offered by the keyword. Starting without a clue, the students firstly thought of some words with meanings related to the keyword, and forms that fit the starting letters of the keyword. Then the students tried to form sentences based on the first words, but ignored the connection between the sentences. Finally, the students revised the grammar mistakes in the acrostics.

The following extract shows the process of Pair 1 creating the acrostic 'Teacher' (see Extract 1). The pair started with the words 'teach', 'education', 'academic', etc, based on the consideration of the form and the meaning constrains of acrostics. After coming up with one starting word for each line, they stopped exploring other possible words to lead the sentence. Instead, they chose to complete the sentence with the starting words. 'Teach' developed into 'teach people' (turn 1&2), and 'education' developed into 'education are based them' (turn 3-10). The pair did not pay much attention to the coherence between the sentences, which resulted in the acrostic lacking integration. The idea they had was to scramble the sentences and phrases according to the order of the letters of the keyword, only to make the meaning of the phrases and the sentences relate to the keyword 'teacher'. This idea can be seen from turn 40-41 in Extract 1. Moreover, the students also reported the process as 'completing the tasks without rules' and 'messy'. For instance, the part 'Education are based them. A great career. Can give us knowledge.' Despite the fact that the three phrases are related to the teacher, it's hard to find connection and the coherent devices between the phrases.

Teacher (6: 29) – Pair 1	
Teach people	
Education are based them	
A great career	
Can give us knowledge	
Help me learn about anythings I want to know	
Every body need them	
Remember them forever	
L1: Learner 1 L2: Learner 2 @=laugh [ ]=translation …=pause	
1. L2: Teacher…	26. L2: A great career… Yeah.
2. L1: Teach people? @@	27. L1: Can give us knowledge, 行么[Is it Ok]？
3. L1: Education?	28. L2: Give us knowledge.
4. L2: Education.	29. L1: 行么[Is it Ok]？
5. L1: @@@	30. L2: Yeah.
6. L1: Them? … Education bases them.	31. L1: Is there a 'd'?
7. L2: Education what?	32. L2: 是 'g'吧 [I think it's 'g'].
8. L1: Bases them… base…	33. L1: 我不知道 [I don't know].
…	34. L2: Help me? … learn about something… I want to know.
9. L2: Based them.	35. L1: Learn about things I want to… know…
10. L1: 建立在他们身上[is built on them]…	36. L1: Everybody need them.
11. L1: Academic career.	37. L2: Everybody… need?
12. L2: Academic 什么[What]?	38. L1: Them.
13. L1: 学术[academic].	39. L1: Remember them forever.@@@
14. L1: 你想想行吗？[Can you think about it?]	
15. L2: 我在想啊。[I'm thinking on it.]	

16. L1: 伟大怎么说啊？[How do you say 'great' in English?]	40. L2: @@@ 跟老师没关系吧 (that's not related to teachers).
17. L2: 伟大？[great?] you ask teacher.	41. L1: 有关系 (It is related).
18. T: 伟大is 'great'.	...
19. L1：A great... a great... 事业[career]。怎么说？[How do you say it?]	42. T: Do you want to read it again? Your poem? Have a look if you want to change anything.
20. L2: 事业啊？[career?]	43. L1: Teach people, education are based them. A great career. Can give us knowledge. Help me learn about anything I want to know. Everybody need them. Remember them forever.
21. L1: Job?	
22. T: 事业 is 'career'.	
23. L1: How do you spell it?	44. L2: Everything 吧？(Is it 'everything'?) 不是 anything(It's not 'anything').
24. L2: C-A-R-E-E-R.	...
25. L1: Ok... 你觉得呢？[How do you think about it?]	

Extract 1: Pair 1's unguided task 'Teacher'

Checking the outcome of the unguided tasks, it was difficult to see creative use of language. Moreover, most sentences of the acrostics are not grammatical (e.g 'Joy' of Pair 1).

Table 2. Pair 1's product 'Joy'

Joy (10: 51) – Pair 1
Joke always produce it
Optimistic in my mind
You feel it when you are luck

4.2. The Guided Tasks – Creating Pictorial Scenes

The process of creating acrostics after the guided pre-task stage was influenced both by ordered thinking and chaotic thinking. The ordered thinking appeared before the chaotic thinking. The students started by selecting the words from the wordlists they had come up with in the brainstorming section. And then they formed the phrases and sentences. This time, the connection between the phrases and sentences was noticed. When the wordlists they had could not meet their need of creating an integrate image of the subject, they went back to explore more vocabulary under the form constraint by using chaotic thinking.

Extract 2 shows the process in which Pair 2 completing the task for the word 'Holiday' after the pre-task stage. L3, the girl said the picture that emerged from the word "holiday" in her mind should contain ocean, beaches, a lot of people, hot sun and hot guys. L4 was intrigued by her description and laughed a lot about her idea of 'hot guys'. The pair started by sorting their ideas, and then selected 'hot guys' (turn 4). However, L4 did not totally follow what L3 had imagined, and he added his own thoughts. Instead of putting the "hot guys on the beach," he chose to put them on the street (turn 4-7). In his mental picture, he reported a holiday as a trip (see the transcript in Appendix2). This image somewhat influenced the development of the story. When they could not find the suitable words from the results of the pre-task to continue creating their "acrostic story", they entered another stage of chaotic thinking (e.g turn 23-43) until they finished the task.

Holiday (10: 09) – Pair 2
Hot guys in the trip
Open your eyes
Look at me
Interesting things will happen
During the trip you will see some

Animals in the zoo You and me	
1. T: Now you can start your second task about holiday. 2. L3&L4：Ok. … 3. T: Think about what was in your head before. 4. L4: Hot guys in the street…@@@@ 5. L3: What? @@@ hot guys in the street@@@ 6. L4: Street? 街上[street] 7. L3: 为什么他们在街上？[Why are they on the street?] 既然你这样开头了，那下一句就open your eyes [Since you used a starting sentence like that, then let's make the next sentence 'open your eyes'.]… look for me…这句话可以吗[is this Ok?] 8. L4: look… for me 9. L3: 这个是对的吧？[Is this correct?] 10. L4: them 吧？[Shall we use 'them'?] them… 11. T: 你们想表述什么？[What do you want to express?] 12. L4: 看向我？还是注意我？[Look at me? Or notice me?] 13. L3: 我不知道。[I don't know.] 14. T: 看向我是look at me, look for是找东西的意思。['look at me' is look at me; 'look for' means trying to find something.] 15. L4: Look at me… 16. L3: Ok. 17. L4: Open your eyes, look at me. 18. L3: 反正你第一句话都是这个。[It goes well with the first sentence] I… I'm crazy? @@@ Look at me, I'm crazy. @@@ 19. L4: @@@… interesting things… will happen? 20. L3: Hm?? 21. L4: Interesting things will happen. 有趣的事情将要发生。[Something interesting is about to happen.] 22. L3: @@@写吧[write it] 23. L4: 'D'…Different… Drink… Don't… Don't interest… 24. L3: @@@ Don't touch me… 25. L4: @@@	26. L3: @@@ 27. T: What are you thinking? You're laughing a lot… 28. L4: No@@@ 29. L3: Don't… Don't… 30. T: Us 31. L4: 快点加入我们？[join us?] 32. T: 你自己想。[You have to think about it yourself.] 33. L4: 不要离开我们，在家会很无聊。[Don't leave us; it's boring at home.]@@@ 34. L3: @@@ yes 35. L4: @@@ Yes? 那就这样写吧？[shall we write like this?] 36. L3: @@ ok 37. L4: 但是我们才开始，再想一下。[But we are just starting, let's think more.] … 开着跑车在奔驰？[Drive a nice car running on the road?] 在飞驰?.. [flying on the road?] … 38. L4: D-U-R-I-N-G, 什么意思？[What does it mean?] 39. T: During? 就是在什么期间[it means within a period]. 40. L3: During the journey… 41. L4: During the trip… you can see… a lot of animals in the zoo?@@@ 42. L3: @@@ 43. L4: During the trip. 可以吧？[Is it ok?] The interesting thing 就是去动物园。[The interesting thing is going to the zoo.]@@@During… the… trip… you can see…some animals… in the zoo… 44. L3: 'y'…'y'… you and me @@@ 45. L4: You and me? 46. L3: 我们几个[we people] 47. L4: 然后怎么说来着？[What shall we say after?] 48. L3: 完了啊。[Then it's finished.] 49. L4: You and me? 啊，就这样完了啊？[Ah, that's it?] 50. L3: @@@ yeah

Extract 2: Pair 2's guided task 'Holiday'

Interestingly, I found that Pair 2 was very careful with the logic between the sentences to integrate the lines that make up the acrostic. A good example is that they mentioned the relationship between 'interesting things will happen' and 'during the trip, you will see some animals in the zoo' (turn 41-43). At the narrative level, the creative use of language improved after the pre-task stage. This was also reflected in Pair 1's guided task on the word 'Holiday' (see the table below). In their final acrostic of "Holiday" Pair 1 created a picture of a man having fun with his girlfriend and friends. This kind of pictorial scenes was also mentioned by the students in their questionnaire responses. They claimed that their acrostic writing was associated to the picture that they had imagined before.

  Moreover, at the lexical choices level, the use of words that give a fresher feeling, such as 'open your vision' ('Holiday' from Pair 1) and 'sweet smile' ('School' from Pair 2) can be observed. An examination of the syntactic level, shows that the complexity of the sentences also improved. For the first time, the students split a sentence across two lines (e.g 'During the trip you will see some/Animals in the zoo.'). In addition, students started to use the present participle (e.g. 'dancing and drinking', 'looking forward to holiday').

Table 3. The product 'Holiday' and 'School'

Holiday (15:46) – Pair 1 Help you relax Open your vision Love the day Invite your friend Dancing and drinking Accompany with your girl Your best Day	School (7:09) – Pair 2 Sweet smile in here Chinese student over the world Hurt of my heart Oh my god Old teachers talk a lot Looking forward to holiday

5. Discussion

Based on the previous description, the results suggest that the pre-task helped the learners discover and describe their mental image of the keywords, which to some extent facilitated their completion of the tasks using language creatively. Moreover, the teacher's guidance positively influenced the students' thinking process.

One of the possible explanations may be that the pre-task stage helps the students explore the mental images that aid them in the creation of the concept of the keyword by reflecting on their understanding and experience. Furthermore the brainstorm activity builds the students' lexical storage in preparation for the production of the acrostics. As shown in Table 4 below, the lexical items involved in completing the guided tasks are far more than the ones involved in the unguided tasks. With this preparation, the students were able to use ordered thinking. Finke (1996) described that the creativity of ordered thinkers was normally 'highly structured and was directly connected to the previous ideas and concepts' (pp. 390). By simultaneously using mental images, ordered thinking and chaotic thinking, the learners managed to achieve better performance in the creative writing tasks, despite the fact that they lacked experience, vocabulary and grammatical knowledge.

Table 4. The lexical items involved the in the guided and unguided tasks, examples of Pair 1

Lexis involved in completing unguided task 'teacher' (Pair 1)	Lexis involved in completing guided task 'school' (Pair 1)
teach; people; education; base; them; academic; career; great; job; can; give us knowledge; help me; learn about; something; need; everybody; them; remember; forever; be; anything (22 lexical items)	students; smiles; sad; study; special parties; classes; congratulations; copy homework; conversation; coach; computer room; campus; hate; happiness; high mark; hopeful; opinions; of (sth); open your mind; laugh; later, etc. (around 50 lexical items)

6. Conclusion

In summary, this essay has made an attempt to make highly-constrained acrostic tasks became more practical for students with limited English proficiency and little or no experience with creative writing tasks. It has been observed that by conducting a pre-task stage in which the teacher leads the students to create and describe mental images corresponding to the keyword of the acrostics, the students were able to use more creative language and increase text coherency. Moreover, the pre-task stage positively influenced the thinking process of the students while they were doing the tasks. Based on the research, that the teachers can apply such pre-task stage in the classroom to assist the student to achieve better performance in the creative writing tasks with high constrains. However, it can be quite time-consuming with large-scale classrooms. The discussed results of this essay are based on a small-scale study; thus, further research related to large-scale classroom settings needs to be conducted.

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