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Linguistic creativity in language learning: Investigating the impact of creative text materials and teaching approaches in the second language classroom

Julia Hofweber

University of Reading

Suzanne Graham

University of Reading

Abstract: This paper presents the rationale for *Linguistic Creativity in Language Learning*, a classroom-based research project. The project investigates the impact of using literary texts on learners' second language literacy, motivation and linguistic and non-linguistic creativity. It also explores how different teaching approaches ('creative' versus 'functional') may modulate the effects of exposure to texts. The participants in the study are learners of French and German in English secondary schools in Year 9 (age 14). The initial pilot study results presented in this paper suggest that learners view language learning as difficult but generally worthwhile, and express an interest in experiencing 'real-life' applications of the second language. The project aims to address this need by generating practical advice for novel teaching methods using authentic text materials in the second language classroom.

Keywords: creativity, motivation, literature, authenticity, teaching approaches

Background

Linguistic Creativity in Language Learning is the Education Strand (Strand 7) of a larger project, *Creative Multilingualism*, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) as part of its Open World Research Initiative (OWRI). One of the central aims of OWRI is to enhance the perceived value of language learning and to strengthen the take-up and learning of languages in schools and wider society (see also Gayton, 2017). *Creative Multilingualism* explores how multilingualism stimulates creativity, what types of creativity are involved in multilingualism, and how creativity manifests itself in multilingual processes. Strand 7 is a collaborative initiative between the Universities of Reading and Cambridge, exploring language learning and linguistic creativity in schools. More specifically, Strand 7 investigates how the use of literary texts and creative teaching approaches impact learners' second language literacy development (reading, writing, vocabulary, and understanding of figurative language), their motivation for language learning, and their linguistic and non-linguistic creativity. The participants in the study are approximately 550 Year 9 learners (age 14) of French and German across 14 secondary schools in England, drawn from a range of different socio-economic contexts. Learners' motivation and language development are particularly important at this stage of schooling because learners are about to make crucial decisions as to whether they should continue learning foreign languages and select them as an option for GCSE, the examination taken by learners in England at age 16.

Rationale

The design of the project was guided by the following three research questions:

1. What is the impact of exposure to L2 literary texts on learners' motivation and linguistic creativity, compared with exposure to non-literary texts?
2. How do different teaching approaches ('creative' versus 'functional') modulate the effects of exposure to literary or non-literary texts?
3. How does exposure to the two text types and teaching approaches modulate learners' general creative abilities?

Rationale for the study

RQ 1: Text types (Literary versus non-literary texts)

In England, the National Curriculum for Modern Foreign Languages (2014), new GCSE and A-levels place greater emphasis than before on the use of authentic written materials, including literary sources. The National Curriculum states that learners should "read literary texts in the language" which will in turn "stimulate ideas, develop creative expression" and help learners "write prose using an increasingly wide range of grammar and vocabulary and write creatively to express their own ideas and opinions" (Department for Education, 2013). Literary texts are also included in the new GCSE examinations for MFL, where in writing learners are required to demonstrate their ability "to make independent, creative and more complex use of the language" (Department for Education, 2015). It is thus implied that exposing learners to literary texts will develop their ability to use language more 'creatively', as well as stimulate their motivation for language learning. While this assumption seems intuitive and plausible, there is in fact little empirical evidence of the superiority of using literary texts rather than more factual texts with teenage language learners, because research to date has paid little if any attention to this issue (Paran, 2008).

Previous research has not only concentrated on the use of literature with adult learners but has rarely directly compared the use of literary and non-literary texts. As it is arguably important that educational policy and curriculum design are supported by research evidence, the Linguistic Creativity project sets out to investigate whether exposure to L2 literary texts does indeed enhance linguistic creativity and which teaching approaches should be adopted to achieve the intended effect. It takes into account the wide range of skills subsumed under the term 'linguistic creativity', differentiating between a 'narrow definition' referring to the ability to generate novel linguistic combinations, and a 'wide definition' referring to discourse-level linguistic creativity, such as the creative use of language to convey the story grammar, the artistic use of language to achieve stylistic effects or the use of language to express emotions and personal views (Figure 1).

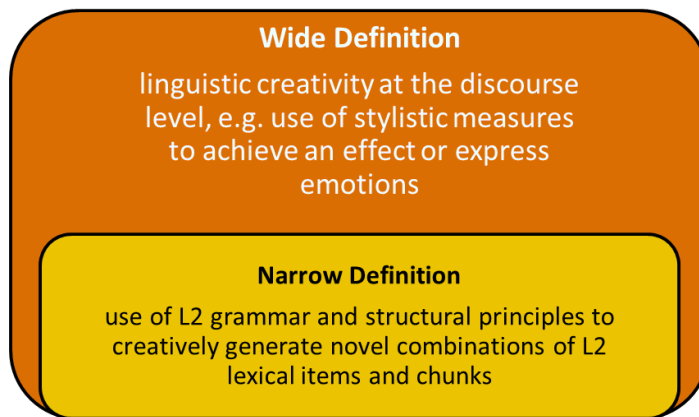


Figure 1: Narrow and wide definitions of linguistic creativity

Several factors suggest that engaging with L2 literature may have the potential to enhance learners' motivation to learn the L2, as well as linguistic creativity in both the narrow and the wide sense. First, exposure to L2 poetry in particular might facilitate the development of linguistic creativity in the narrow sense, i.e. the ability to combine lexical items creatively. At the initial stages of L2 acquisition learners start off using formulaic sequences, but then they gradually break these chunks down (Myles, Hooper & Mitchell, 1998). This enables them to generate novel combinations of words themselves. Exposure to literature, and to poetry in particular, has been argued to lead to enhanced 'noticing' of how language works. It involves the use of novel linguistic forms and combinations and thus naturally draws learners' attention to formal aspects of language (Hanauer, 2001).

Exposure to L2 literature may also support linguistic creativity in the wider sense. Poetry draws upon a range of more and less conventional stylistic means to communicate emotional states, express opinions and emphasise key messages. The often repetitive structural pattern of poetry means that these stylistic features become more salient for readers (Hanauer, 2001), helping them to adopt L2-idiomatic modes of expression, such as emphasising, creating cohesion and expressing emotions.

A wide range of vocabulary is also important for linguistic creativity. However, research indicates that pupils learning French in England (aged 11-16) acquire only 170 words a year, with progress being particularly slow in Years 8 and 9 (ages 13-14) (Milton, 2006). Learning vocabulary through reading may be more effective if learners have a deeper sense of 'involvement' and process the language more deeply (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). Reading literary texts may well facilitate more elaborate and involved processing because poetry is emotionally as well as cognitively engaging. This is also potentially true for texts containing metaphorical language, which learners need to process more deeply (Hoang, 2014). Thus, figurative, metaphorical language within poetry may increase learners' chance of retaining new vocabulary and structures encountered in texts. However, these claims are largely speculative as there is little empirical research on the relationship between metaphors and L2 vocabulary retention to date. This study aims to address this gap in the research.

Another crucial factor impacting the success of vocabulary acquisition is learners' intrinsic motivation to acquire the second language (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). Low motivation for and uptake of language learning have been linked to low levels of proficiency, self-efficacy, L2 confidence and enjoyment of learning the second language (Erler & Macaro, 2011; Graham, 2004). Indeed, there is evidence that learners who choose to pursue a language post-16 cite an intrinsic interest in the language and its culture for making that choice (Fisher 2001; Graham, 2004). Likewise, a sense of personal relevance (Taylor & Marsden, 2014) has been found to be a key factor in determining whether adolescent learners in England chose to continue language study after the age of 14.

RQ 2: Teaching approaches ('creative' versus 'functional')

It is likely that the effect of L2 literature exposure depends on how these texts are used in the classroom. Therefore, this study not only explores how the use of different text types (literary versus non-literary) impacts language learning, but also compares different teaching approaches ('creative' versus 'functional'). Indeed, previous research suggests that teaching approaches may modulate the impact of literature in the second language classroom (Paran, 2008). Using a personalised and creative approach, encouraging personal responses, Kim (2004) found a positive impact of L2 literature exposure. The personalised approach provided learners with opportunities for extended spoken output, thus leading to a great deal of interaction and an increase in learners' communicative competency. However, Donato and Brooks (2004) found the opposite effect, if teachers lacked skill in using literature, resulting in them doing little more than asking factual display questions about texts.

This suggests that the learning outcome depends not only on the materials used, but also on how they are used. To investigate the interaction between text type and teaching approach, our project will compare the outcome of different teaching approaches, using identical materials. Each text type (literary and non-literary) will be administered using two different teaching approaches. We call the first of these the 'creative' approach. It involves activities relating the materials to learners' personal, emotional and intellectual experience, e.g. by asking students how they like the text and why or by asking students to write their own poem or turn the poem into a dramatic performance. This is contrasted with what we call a 'functional' approach, which focuses on grammar and vocabulary, e.g. by asking students to underline examples of the perfect tense in the text or to answer information-gathering comprehension questions about the text.

RQ 3: How does exposure to L2-literature and creative teaching approaches modulate learners' general creative abilities?

Language and cognition are not separate but intricately interrelated (Pavlenko, 2011). Hence, this study goes beyond exploring creativity on a purely linguistic basis and takes into account learners' general creative abilities. The term creativity describes a range of cognitive processes enabling individuals to come up with novel, yet appropriate, solutions to a given problem. This involves diverging from conventional thought patterns. Bilingualism has been shown to enhance creative abilities (Cushen & Wiley,

2011; Kharkhurin, 2009, 2010; Leikin, 2012; Ricciardelli, 1992) because bilinguals draw upon greater cognitive resources to generate original solutions. Second language learners are emerging bilinguals, so in this project we predict learners' creative abilities to increase as they grow their L2 repertoire.

There are however few studies exploring the relationship between second language learning and general creativity in instructed contexts. Landry (1973) found second language learning in primary schools to improve non-verbal creativity. Fourth graders who had learnt a second language scored significantly higher than the non-language group. Similarly, Lasagabaster (2000) investigated verbal creativity in relation to different bilingual education models in the Basque region: (i) bilingual immersion, (ii) partial bilingual immersion, (iii) monolingual / no immersion. Students in the bilingual immersion programmes outperformed students in the monolingual programme in creativity, suggesting that teaching approaches have the potential to modulate creative performance and that instructed bilingualism enhances creative abilities. The students in Lasagabaster's (2000) study were aged between 10 and 14 years, so their age range was comparable to that of learners in our study.

In this study, we are exploring the specific impact of exposure to L2 literature and creative teaching approaches on general creative cognition. Given the figurative nature of literary language, exposure to L2 literature may well enhance the creation of new metaphorical form-meaning mappings and connections, thus creating new pathways for divergent thinking. The creative linguistic means employed in poetry in particular may foster divergent thinking. Indeed, Scott and Huntington (2002) found an increase in cultural awareness and cognitive flexibility amongst a group of university students studying a French poem about Côte D'Ivoire, compared to a group of students presented with a fact sheet about the region. Whether the same will be found with adolescent learners is an area we are keen to explore.

Methods

Our project will take the form of a longitudinal study conducted over a period of 10 months, starting in autumn 2017 and finishing in summer 2018. We will provide materials for teachers to use during the intervention. For each language (French and German), schools will be split into groups following a teaching intervention based on literary texts (poems) and groups administering a teaching intervention based on non-literary texts (newspaper articles). The text materials will be matched on a range of criteria indicating readability, such as word number, word length, word frequency, sentence length, cognates and subordination (Benjamin, 2012; Uitdenbogerd, 2005). Each group will undergo a phase of using functional teaching approaches, and a phase of using creative teaching approaches. Each phase will last around 7 weeks. At the start and end of each phase, there will be pre- and post-tests assessing learners' attitudes, their vocabulary size, reading skills, writing skills (linguistic creativity), metaphor awareness and general creative performance.

It has been challenging to design tests that are both accessible to Year 9 learners and also tap into linguistic creativity and general creativity. Brief details of some of our tasks are outlined in Table 1:

Table 1: Examples of tasks

Reading task	Learners will be presented with a short text in German / French and asked to summarise the text in their own words in English.
Writing task	To assess productive skills, as well as linguistic and non-linguistic creativity, learners will be shown a picture and asked to write anything they like about it in the target language. Linguistic creativity in the narrow sense will be captured by formal indicators, such as lexical diversity, syntactic complexity and deviations from formulaic patterns. Linguistic creativity in the wider sense will be assessed, for example, by evaluating learners' ability to express emotions and opinions.
Vocabulary	We will use a simple yes/no test based on Meara and Milton (2003) to assess the size of learners' vocabulary knowledge in either French and German. In addition, we will use simple L2 to English translation tests to assess how well learners retain vocabulary presented in the texts.
Questionnaires assessing attitudes and motivation	A questionnaire will capture learners' attitudes and motivation. Metaphors are a great way of qualitatively assessing learners' attitudes towards and beliefs about the second language, so we will be asking learners to describe their learning experience in metaphorical terms (Fisher, 2013).
Creativity (verbal & non-verbal)	The Abbreviated Torrance Test for Adults ATTA (Goff & Torrance, 2002) assesses divergent thinking. It generates scores for fluency (number of ideas), flexibility (variety of ideas) and originality (novelty of idea). The test assesses both the verbal and figurative expression of creative thought.

Pilot Study results

To establish whether the designed test materials were adequate for Year 9 learners, a small pilot study was conducted with French (N=31) and German (N=39) learners. We present some preliminary observations of interest from the from the metaphor task in the questionnaire and from the writing task.

In the questionnaire, learners generally expressed positive attitudes towards language learning. They gave low agreement ratings to statements such as “English people don’t need to learn foreign languages” or “Learning other languages is a waste of time”. Their metaphorical descriptions of the L2 (Table 2) show that they appreciate the importance of learning the L2 (“important-ish”, “creamy stuff in Lindor”), but that they are finding the acquisition process difficult (“hard to break through”) or boring (“sitting in lessons”). Hence, they display a general willingness to learn foreign languages, but feel that the process of learning could be made more attractive. Moreover, learners express an appreciation of authentic language use (“using the skills outside of school”), suggesting that the use of authentic texts, such as literature, might have a positive impact on language learning. By comparing German to a “cake”, made up of “loads of parts to make one thing, like how they join words together”, one learner also demonstrated their awareness of linguistic creativity.

Table 2: Metaphor task questionnaire (German)

If German was a food it would be ...	... because...
Cake	it's got loads of parts to make one thing, like how they join words together
Cake	I like the icing (using the skills out of school), not the cake (learning it or sitting in lessons)
Lindor	it's difficult to break through the shell to get to the creamy stuff inside
a bowl of cereal	boring but important-ish
slightly spicy, very hot sausage	there are some harder bits and it takes a while before you're ready

The writing task was designed to tap into the core research interest of this study, linguistic creativity. Results revealed that learners were unused to responding to open-ended questions requiring more 'creative' responses. On average learners produced no more than 36 words in the picture-based activity with the word count ranging from as few as 2 words to 107 words. This underlines the challenges teacher face when asked to work towards the goal of L2 linguistic creativity. We hope our project will provide them with some guidelines to make that challenge more manageable.

Conclusion

This study investigates the impact of the use of literary texts and creative teaching approaches on learners' attitudes towards language learning, as well as on their linguistic and non-linguistic creativity. Thus, it tests a key claim inherent in the MFL National Curriculum and new GCSEs, namely that exposure to L2 literature enhances linguistic creativity and improves attitudes and motivation. An important aim of the study is not only to make concrete recommendations for practitioners, but also to find out whether aspects of language policy and curriculum design really do stand up to scrutiny from research. At each stage of the project, it will be important for us to get feedback from practitioners as well as from our participating teachers. We will have plenty of teaching materials to be made freely available at the end of the project, as well as some fascinating findings which we will present at the final project conference.

You can 'watch this space' by looking for updates on our website:

<https://www.creativeml.ox.ac.uk/research/language-learning>. For further updates, you can also follow us on Twitter @creativelangs

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