Creative teaching using Chinese calligraphy and games in motivating primary modern foreign language

Chin-Chuan Liu

Abstract

This project research aims to explore how creative teaching approaches can motivate modern foreign language in primary school. The project of creative teaching includes five lessons in teaching Mandarin. The project used traditional Chinese calligraphy sessions and creative games in order to increase motivation for both the language and Chinese culture. A total of 4 students participated in the project throughout a five-week period, which was part of my school placement as a PGCE student. Through the gathering of students' feedback and observation of their behaviour, the results of this research have shown that creative pedagogy can positively influence students' learning motivation in foreign language by providing unexpected experiences, games, and agency in learning.

Key words: creativity, modern foreign language, language learning, creative teaching, Chinese calligraphy, agency in learning, creative pedagogy.

1. Introduction

The introduction of foreign language in primary school is beneficial for students in developing bilingual abilities and it provides opportunities for intercultural understanding (Maynard, 2012). Research showed that bilingualism enables individual to systematise language for better manipulation (Marian & Shook, 2012). In terms of social benefits, people with bilingual abilities are able to gain unique cultural assets through direct communication (Marian & Shook, 2012). However, children may not realise or even access these benefits if they are demotivated by the language learning process. Demotivation in language learning can be due to different reasons. According to Meshkat and Hassani (2012), with regard to teaching styles and class materials, male students experienced a more intense feeling of demotivation than female students (cited in Han et al.,2019). Despite the research's inconclusiveness of gender differences in language learning, it is still evident that students' learning motive is highly dependent on teaching style and learning materials.

Understanding this relationship led this research project to explore the effect of a creative teaching approach in foreign language learning motivation. Nikolov (1999), who conducted research on language learning motivation, indicated that children between the age of 6 to 14 are more interested in learning that involves play and intrinsically motivating experiences. Learning based on fun experience, as mentioned by Clarke (2014), is one of the focus of creative teaching. The

element of autonomy in creative learning also contributes to an increase in children's intrinsic motivation in second language learning (Wu, 2003). In light of the features of creative teaching mentioned by scholars, this research aims to investigate how this approach can be applied in teaching foreign language. Additionally, this report will also look into the effect of creative teaching has on primary students' passion in foreign language learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Creativity in foreign language teaching

In order to apply a creative approach in teaching foreign language, it is important for teaching practitioners to understand the meaning of creativity in foreign language teaching and strategies. Craft (2003) described creativity as possibility thinking, which refers to the ability to think of another route to solve a question (p. 1). In the context of language teaching, creativity can be generated by teachers who provide unexpected ways of learning language through the use of authentic resources (Clarke, 2014). Apart from the feature of unexpectedness, Clarke (2014) mentioned that creativity in language teaching also involves the consideration of providing meaning, open-mindedness, innovation, enjoyment etc. Teaching practitioners can use these features as guide to develop creativity in teaching modern foreign language.

2.2. Strategies for creative teaching

Teachers can help develop creativity in teaching by linking the phonological, semantic, and grammatical structure of students' first language and taught language (Clarke, 2014). With the prior knowledge of students' first language, they are able to relate back to the first language structure whenever they encounter difficulties in learning the taught language. This process has been mentioned by March (1991)'s theory of exploration and exploitation. According to Goncher et al. (2009), prior knowledge is used as resources to help individuals explore alternative solutions to a problem. Similarly, students are able to be creative in the taught language by using first language knowledge if the two languages are well linked together. Intrinsically, students may be motivated to learn as new knowledge is linked to something they already know or even mastered. This strategy also considers the importance of meaning when developing a creative teaching approach. Another creative strategy is the application of the concept "languaging" (Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004, cited in Clarke, 2014, p.4). This term is defined as the active meaning-making and communication in life (Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004). In practice, students will learn creatively if the learning is based on real life contexts. As children understand the context of when to use certain phrases and practice it in real situation, meaning is developed. As a result, the consideration of developing meaning will lead to the rise of interest in the taught language (Clarke, 2014).

Last but not least, Creative teaching encompasses a sense of fun and open-mindedness (Clarke, 2014). The use of play and games will encourage primary students to engage in learning the taught language. According to Liao et al. (2018), a group of students who received

creative pedagogy in foreign language learning are more likely to engage in activities. Participants mentioned in the research that they prefer dynamic over static learning. Hence, making language learning a fun experience can be an option to teach creatively. Teachers may also include tasks that require physical movements to spur children's interest.

To sum up, this project utilised the three strategies mentioned above to investigate how creative approaches influence children's passion in foreign language learning. However, creative approaches should not only be used in the teaching side, but also the learning side of classroom practice.

2.3. The Creative pedagogy framework

The creative pedagogy framework by Lin (2009) is a structure that includes three elements of creative practices. This framework worked as an assessment tool to the level of creativity in this project. In the creative pedagogy framework, Lin (2009) pointed out three crucial features of creative pedagogy, which includes creative teaching, teaching for creativity, and creative learning. Firstly, creative teaching, as mentioned by Lin (2009), refers to the degree of creativity in the teacher's teaching approach. More specifically, the creative teaching element assesses creativity by looking at whether the teaching is imaginative and interesting (Lin, 2009). In terms of the learning side, the framework introduced the other two components: teaching for creativity and creative learning.

Secondly, teaching for creativity assesses, instead of how the teacher teaches, the creativity of the tasks and whether they encourage students to explore more possibilities (Lin, 2009). The teachers' design of activities and materials can determine the extent of students' creative thinking. For example, when teaching conversations and greetings, teachers can enable creativity by letting students' substitute the names and places of the sentence (Clarke, 2014). Creative materials can also include any forms of creative experiences such as literature or arts (Clarke, 2014). This project utilised the Chinese calligraphy, which is an art form of Chinese writing. Apart from promote creativity, materials and tasks based on creative experiences may also be a strategy to grow children's interest in understanding the culture.

Thirdly, creative learning that assesses the degree of autonomy learners possess in the learning process (Lin, 2009). The framework not only works as the assessment tool for this project, it is also the project's main structure to a creative approach as it includes multifaceted aspects and consideration to embedding creativity in foreign language teaching.

3.   Methodology

A mixed method of action research and interpretive research was utilised in this report to research the effect of creative teaching on both the teaching and learning sides in modern foreign language. The main purpose of this project was to investigate how creative teaching approaches motivate primary school students to learn foreign language. An interpretive research approach enables researchers to understand people's thoughts and behaviour in communal and organisational context (Villiers, 2005, p. 12). In terms of data collection, this project aimed to gather information of children's perspectives towards their own learning through the use of a feedback sheet. The feedback sheet included a rating system that allowed students to rate how interesting the lesson was and a few questions about what motivated them to learn foreign language. Also, the classes were audio recorded, which were transcribed for data collection. The evidence gathered was categorised into different main themes.

In terms of the action research, the Macintyre's model is used, which involves planning, implementation, and evaluation phase (James & Augustin, 2017). By doing action research, researchers generate new knowledge in how existing teaching practices can be improved (McNiff, 2017, p.18). The transcripts gathered from the class were used as evidence towards the improvement of the creative teaching practice.

3.1 Participants

In terms of project participants, a total of four Year 6 (age 10-11) students were chosen. The four students were selected according to their backgrounds and experiences in learning Mandarin. This project utilised purposive sampling in order to investigate the effect of the creative approach. Purposive sampling allows this project to select a group of individuals that are most relevant to the interest of this research (Etikan et al., 2016, p.2) Three of the students have been learning Mandarin during Key Stage 1 but appeared to be uninterested in the current class, whereas one student has not learned Mandarin before.

3.2 Materials and design

The target language is Mandarin. The project consisted of five Chinese calligraphy lessons. In each session, students wrote calligraphy first and learned how to put together the characters into a sentence. As mentioned by Clarke (2014), creative materials for foreign language learning include comparison between taught and first language. Chinese calligraphy may broaden children's concept of writing as Chinese calligraphy is different from English writing. In this project, the Chinese calligraphy session also served the purpose of enabling cultural understanding.

Underneath every character, there was translation of the word in English. This was the concept inspired by Clarke (2014)'s idea of linking students' first language. Students played one game in each session so the knowledge taught can be practiced and learned. At the end of each session, students filled in one survey about their learning. Additionally, the theme of each lesson was decided by the children, as this project follows Wu (2003)'s idea of creative learning where students possess the autonomy towards their learning.

> Lesson 1 Theme: Names and greetings (1 hour)
>
> Lesson 2 Theme: The Chinese twelve zodiac (1 hour)
>
> Lesson 3 Theme: Mathematics & Mandarin - Addition & subtraction (1 hour)
>
> Lesson 4 Theme: Science & Mandarin - animals (1 hour)
>
> Lesson 5 Theme: Self-assessment (1 hour)

3.3 Ethics

Before the four students participated in the project, a short debrief was completed by the researcher to clarify the research purpose and outcomes to both students and parents. A consent form was signed by both students and parents, as the researcher acknowledged the participants' rights in participating and withdrawing from the research project (BERA, 2018). Last but not least, all personal information was anonymised and stored carefully to protect the participants (BERA, 2018).

4. Data analysis

Students filled in the feedback sheet questions and ratings throughout the five-week period. The ratings from each week's feedback sheet can indicate whether there is an increase or decrease in their passion for modern foreign language. In terms of how they are motivated, all the answers from each week were gathered and a theme may be generalised from the students' feedback. In terms of the transcripts of the class, the behaviours of the researcher and students were categorised according to the three elements of the creative pedagogical framework and indicate if the teacher has utilised each element of the framework.

5. Implications

5.1. Unexpected Experiences

From all the data gathered, most students were motivated and excited by the Chinese calligraphy session and new ways of learning. One student commented on the new way of learning by stating, "It is easier to memorise" (cited to feedback sheet, 2020). The student was referring to the researcher's approach of linking grammatical structure of the taught language and first language. According to Figure 1, there is the English meaning of each word underneath the card. Additionally, before the sentence was taught, I clarified the difference between how the sentence was said in English and Mandarin.
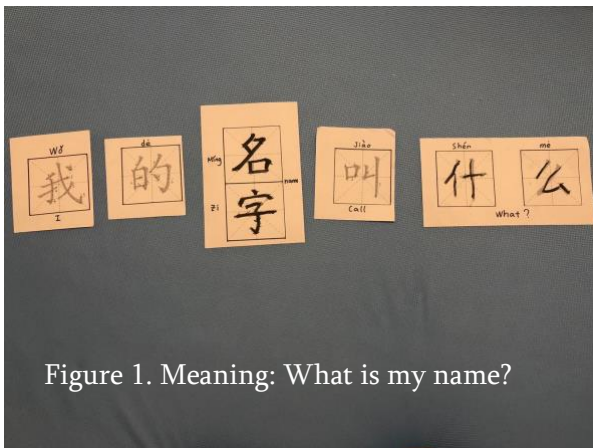
Figure 1. Meaning: What is my name?

This allowed the students to always link back to English when they struggled to remember the sentence. This effort actually allowed the children to access the Mandarin grammatical structure. Additionally, all the children expressed that the Chinese calligraphy pens were different from their normal pencils. As a result, they looked forward to using the pen in the next lesson. Both examples indicated that fresh and unexpected experiences like the new way of learning and the Chinese Calligraphy motivated them to learn about the language. After the Calligraphy session, one of the students said, "Can we please do the brush pen next time?". The results showed that the unexpected, novelty experiences raised their level of motivation to participate in learning Mandarin.

However, this does not mean teachers should necessarily introduce every new experience to students. Instead, teachers should be aware of how children perceived competence might play a big part in foreign language learning process. Wu (2003) indicated that perceived competence refers to students' self-efficacy in the taught language. The more competent students think they are in language learning, the more they will be intrinsically motivated (Wu, 2003). Therefore, it is also crucial for teachers, while providing unexpected experiences, be aware of the level of challenge provided to students.

5.2. Games and play
The second most mentioned motivation in children's feedback was the use of games and play. The element of fun and games in creative teaching can be seen as a motivational activity to supplementary learning in the classroom (Miller, 2008). The reason why games worked so effectively in language learning is because the target language becomes the rule of the game (Miller, 2008). In order to access the game, they need to use the taught language. As a result, they mastered certain sentences through repetition, which is a crucial process in second language acquisition (Kolb, 2007). Therefore, students' feedback informed this research, evidencing the effect of games in motivating foreign language learning.

5.3. Agency in learning
This resulting theme came from the students' frequent expression of how much they enjoy the Maths and Science lesson in the project. The reason for this motivation is considered to be not due to cross-curricular approaches used, but because of autonomy of the learner. These topics were all decided by students themselves and were planned for accordingly. However, this feature of individual choices actually led to children's active learning in the class.

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Agency in learning was also evident in the conversation between students:

> Teacher: Help me to find the sentence 'what is my name' and I'm going to hold it up.
>
> Teacher: Each person can gives me one
>
> *Students trying to figure out what word they need in that sentence*
>
> Student 1: You don't have an 'is'
>
> Student 2: Ni Hao shen me mingzi (Hello, What name?)
>
> Student 1: Ni Jiao Shen Me MingZi (What is your name?)

From the conversation, without the teacher's intervention, student 1 actually helped student 2 to get the sentence right. Students interacted with and learned the answer from each other in an informal conversation, instead of sitting and listening to the teacher's correct answer. Wu (2003) indicated that perceived autonomy, which refers to students' perspective towards their agency in learning, may also have an impact on their learning motivation. The conversation from the project has indicated that creative approaches that promotes self-agency may lead to language acquisition. As children starts to acquire the language, their perceived competence, as mentioned by Wu (2003), may improve.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This project focused on identifying how creative approaches can influence children's motivation in learning modern foreign language. From the feedback sheet, the increase in ratings implied an increase in children's motivation and interest in the class. This also appears in children's comments. During the first lesson of the project, some of the children left some of the questions blank, as nothing had motivated them to learn Mandarin. Therefore, this creative project has helped those students to develop their own motivation in learning Mandarin. However, this research has its own limitations. Though effective, the researcher has only tried this creative approach in a small group of students. Therefore, it does not provide adequate insights of teaching large group of children. Also, the research can be improved by providing more and deeper questions in children's feedback sheet so more insightful results can be generated.

In conclusion, the results of this project suggest that creative approaches have positive effect on foreign language learning motivation. Students are motivated by the provision of unexpectedness in learning, games, and agency in learning. Future research, focusing on a larger sample size and other creative teaching approaches, may help current or future teaching professionals to teach primary modern foreign language effectively.

7. References

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