

## The Elements of Third-Level Creativity in Teaching Speaking in Russian as a Foreign Language

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### Abstract

*The paper will examine the related ideas of artistic approach (as innovation) and creativity applied to the teaching of speaking in Russian as a foreign language. It will describe how the teaching of speaking can move beyond standard ways of presenting and practicing the skill, whether at secondary or tertiary level. Creativity as presented means both on the part of the teacher and the part of students, since it demands that both teacher and students step out of their traditional roles and rethink what it means to speak in the classroom. Different types of speaking will be looked at, from conversation to oral presentations, as well as various ways of integrating teaching and the other language skills. Speaking will be related to more general ideas of problem solving and project work and other ways of harnessing creative ideas, as well as innovative ways of bringing in use of computers and online media to help in making speaking meaningful.*

**Keywords:** creativity, creative approach, creative activities, FL (foreign language), Russian, language acquisition, speaking, model of creative speaking.

### 1.0. Introduction and Literature Review

Everybody at the moment seems to be talking about the need for creativity and artistic approach in education. One of the most influential books on this topic was written by Rodney Jones and Jack Richards under the title 'Creativity in Language Teaching: Perspectives from Research and Practice' (2016). That 'creativity' seems to be the word of the moment, however, should not necessarily make us reject the concept out of hand as just another buzzword which has nothing to do with what we do in the classroom. Buzzwords and movements come along because they meet a need, a lack that teachers have found in what they do in the classroom. So we should examine this concept, neither jumping on the bandwagon uncritically nor ignoring it just because it seems to be fashionable. Just what is meant by creativity will vary enormously from writer to writer, teacher to teacher, but we do not need to spend a lot of time arguing over definitions. With such a multifaceted concept it is natural that any one teacher is going to have a slightly different idea of what constitutes creativity from her colleague.

However, we can start with the idea that creativity must surely involve the production of something new that has not been seen before. That 'something new' must also be something functional or useful in some way, as otherwise the production of a meaningless string of letters like 'xpversepptweterewrw' would count as being creative. So we will take our basic idea of creativity as being the production of something new and different that has some value. How does this relate to Russian language teaching? As indicated above, it is clearly not associated solely with language teaching, still less Russian language teaching, but is part of all education. Nevertheless, there are several ways in which Russian language teaching is more closely connected to the concept of creativity than other areas of teaching and learning. To understand how, we have to distinguish several different aspects of creativity as it relates to Russian language teaching. The first of those is the idea of creativity in language itself. Language use in itself is creative, in the well-known sense going back to Chomsky that every fluent speaker of a language is able to produce, or create, sentences which have never been spoken before.

### 2.0. The Artistic Features and Creativity of Language

As indicated, there is a basic sense in which much of language use is artistic and creative. All of us, in our native language or in a language which we know reasonably well, produce sentences every day which have never been produced before. Thus if I say the sentence 'Фиолетовый крокодил был застрелен вчера в Лондоне охотником южноафриканского племени паджи из самодельного ружья, сделанного буквально из палок и веревки', it is fairly likely that this sentence has never been produced before. This sentence, though, however creative it might be in the Chomskyeian sense, fails to be creative in the further sense that it is any way useful or valuable. There is a further problem here which should strike us as language teachers. That is the point that we cannot expect our learners to be creative, even in this sense, all the time.

For all of us, much of our everyday language use is not creative at all. We use formulaic utterances, like ‘Доброе утро’, ‘Пойдём обедать?’ etc. all the time. None of us produces new, unheard before, utterances all the time. Much of the time our language output makes use of standard utterances or more or less minimal variations on standard utterances. Our learners have to learn to produce such utterances correctly. However, they cannot be said to be using the language competently if that is all they produce. Producing only standard prefabricated set utterances is phrase book language, not real language. So let us call the production of utterances that are more than simply set prefabricated language first order creativity. This means that the learner produces language that, for that learner, has never been uttered before. We are all familiar with this kind of language use. Our students produce this language all the time, in the kind of structural patterns of language work that occupy much of our time in language classes. Thus students practice, for example, the past tense, and produce sentences like ‘Три года назад я был в Санкт-Петербурге и повидал несколько интереснейших исторических мест’ This might be called creativity at the level of structure and vocabulary.

### **3.0. Creativity and Communication**

The above level of creativity is artistic and creative, however, only in the sense of producing utterances that have never been uttered by the student before. They are structurally correct and creative in the Chomskyan sense, but no more than that. They may not even be true or make any sense in context. As a reaction to this, the communicative approach that we are all familiar with insisted that language is used for communication, and that utterances should be communicatively meaningful. This might be called second order creativity, that the sentence is not only newly made by the student but fits the context and has meaning for the student in the context.

Notice, paradox though it might seem, that this second level of creativity is more tightly constrained than the first level. The first level of creativity merely has to be structurally correct; the second level has to be communicatively relevant as well. Thus, in a sense, as pointed out by Tin (2013), when we are creative, we sometimes have to increase the constraints. Leo Messi, for example, would not be so creative if he were not constrained by the rules of football and could just use his hands when he felt like it. But even this level of creativity does not strike us as being truly creative. The utterance produced is appropriate to the situation and may never have been produced by that particular student before, but it is not particularly new. The student may now be saying ‘Я шесть лет жил в Ташкенте’ instead of ‘Я три года жил в Москве’ and it may be very well be true and relevant, but it is not creative in the sense of being a new utterance that has never been spoken before.

### **4.0. Creativity in Classroom**

What is it that strikes us as not very creative in the utterance ‘Я шесть лет жил в Ташкенте’, even although it might be true for that student and he has never said that sentence in Russian before? I think it might be the fact that although the student might not have said that particular sentence in Russian before, he might very well have said that is the same or similar in Uzbek. It is not something that he has not considered before, it is simply expressing in Russian what is a fairly banal everyday thought. Now this sort of communicative use of Russian is necessary and it must be practiced, but it is not creative in the third sense that I want to suggest. This third level of creativity is when a student uses the language to produce language that is not just creative in the first and second senses but also creative in the true sense (Wood & Head, 2004). In other words that language is new and valuable to the student because it is something meaningful to that student. ‘Я шесть лет жил в Ташкенте’ might be true and make sense in the context to the student, but if it is just a communicative drill then it is not creative. It is only third order creative when the student is saying something that is new and meaningful for them.

### **5.0. Examples of Third Order Creativity**

How then do we get students to produce this third order creativity in the classroom situation? I will first of all give an example from my own work as a Russian language teacher. I was given a group of students who were pre-math students to teach, who were going to study in my university, but who were going to go to Russia after 4 semesters to study to become mathematicians. This course would start in 2 weeks, we would need to produce a course from scratch for them and we had never had premed students before.

What to do? What I decided to do was to take advantage of the fact that these students were going to be mathematicians but had not yet started to do math. So, they would get the chance to do math in our Russian language class. What I got them to do was to divide into groups and each group give a presentation to the rest of the class on a particular math formula or theorem.

The twist was that they were not allowed to say what the formula or theorem was, and the rest of the class had to listen, then go away and research and write a report saying what they thought the formula or theorem was and why. Here the students were being third-order creative. They were producing language, in great detail, about a subject that they had never considered before, so they were learning new ideas themselves, and new skills, like how to differentiate between different diseases. They were also personally invested in the presentation, at various levels. They were acting like professionals, discussing the features of formula, so acting at the professional level they were aiming for. The course was also structured as a PBL, problem-based learning, course, which is the framework used in our university and many universities around the world to teach math. In addition, they had the competitive aspect of trying to outwit the other groups and see if they could get them to guess wrongly without deceiving them.

So, they entered into the activity with great enthusiasm and produced very good high-level work, because they were being creative at a high, but appropriate for them, level. It might be argued that this is all very well at tertiary level with highly motivated students, but how can this be done at lower levels? This kind of presenting of a mystery topic, though, is one which could be done at any level. At secondary level, for example, students could present about a particular singer or sportsman that they admired and the class had to guess who it was. Because the students are interested in that particular person they are invested in the presentation and are being creative when they present, the constraint being that they have to hide the identity of the person being presented. A feature of this activity is that the speaking activity is by one speaker or group but the rest of the class is also taking part by listening to the speakers.

However, they are not only listening: they have a task which is also creative in that they have to solve the puzzle presented by the speakers. Moreover, the listeners are not just listening to understand and answer comprehension questions, they are also being creative in that they want to solve the problem presented and they will learn something by doing so. In the case of my students they also had further work in that they had to justify their decision and critique the presentation if they thought it misleading in any way. This is also being creative in that they are doing something with language that enhances their general professional learning and their self-identity as future specialists.

### ***6.0. Ascending the Levels of Creativity***

As mentioned, there are three levels of creativity in the model of creativity I am presenting, and all three need to be used. It is impossible just to operate at the third level of creativity, but equally we should not omit that level. So, what needs to be done is to integrate all three orders of creativity, though not necessarily at the same time or every time. But for every class there should be all three levels, since students need to be able to handle structures, to communicate and to be truly creative. How all three levels can be integrated can be seen in how we might teach, let us say, real and unreal conditionals. At the first presentation, there is no creativity involved, since students are simply learning the different forms and meanings of the conditional.

Then the first level of creativity would be when students completed a conditional sentence with the correct forms. Given "If I became a dancer,..." the students complete the sentence. This is producing a new sentence with the correct forms, but there is no communication and no proper creativity, just the purely linguistic variety.

At the next level, communicative context is brought in, and so the students may be given a context to communicate in, e.g. directing a visitor to the school, as in "If you turn right at the end of this corridor,..." after being given a spot in the school and a target destination. This is communicatively meaningful, but it does not engage the student at a really creative level since the student does not produce any kind of language that is really new and they have never thought before.

The third level is where the creativity really enters. To produce this level, we have to give a context to the students that will bring out what they have not fully described at all. This can be done in the context of real life or a game, that is not important. What is important is that the student comes out with new ideas. An example would be to get teenagers to describe what their life would be like if their dream boy/girlfriend came into their life. Give it a twist - if they had lots of money, if they had no money. What would they feel like if that person then left them? Get them to describe in detail their feelings. That is being creative in the sense that they are personally invested in the language and perhaps are exploring ideas in depth that they had not examined before.

It is often thought that creativity in language classes involves the creative arts, normally creative writing, often doing thing like writing poetry. There is nothing wrong with this and it is possible to get students to do creative writing, e.g. writing haiku.

However, creativity in this third sense is not restricted to just this sort of activity. It is quite possible, for example, to have creative speaking, even at a very basic level. Take for example, the standard beginners' activity of introducing someone to someone else using the structure 'This is x, she/he is my y', as in 'This is Mohammed, he is my brother'. A creative version of this with very young learners would be to give them various pictures of cartoon animals, and get them to introduce the animals to their partner in a pairwork activity. This lets them invent names and relationships, and is creative as they will never have thought about these animals before. Here of course there is a playful element that is especially important for young learners.

### **7.0. Creativity and New Technology**

The title of this talk is innovation and creativity in English language teaching, but I have not mentioned innovation yet. Partly this is because I hope what I have been telling you is recognizable as somewhat innovative. Partly it is because I do not believe in innovation for innovation's sake. We should use new technology, for example, when it enhances our teaching, not just for the sake of it. With that caveat, we need to be aware of new technologies and use them where they can enhance our teaching. As far as speaking is concerned, the Internet is not such a valuable resource as it is in teaching writing or listening for example, since the Internet is a visual medium. However, it can be used to gain access to lots of stimulating materials that can be used for speaking purposes. Most importantly of course the Internet is bigger than the biggest library there ever was, so there is a wealth of information and data that we can use in the classroom available to us. This means that project work is much easier than previously. It is possible to give students a presentation topic, have them research and present it in a much shorter time than previously. In terms of creativity, it means that students can access personally important information at the touch of a mouse. It also means, for example, that they can access visually stimulating examples extremely easily. Many students nowadays of course access the Internet not via computers but via their smartphone. This means that they have Internet access right away in class. As a corollary, it means that you as a teacher do not need to be the only source of teaching materials. Students themselves can access the web, inside or outside class, and use the wealth of materials available there. Do not be afraid to let them access the web in class if they can. For my students at least, this is second nature to them. So rather than forbidding them to access the web, use it to your advantage. Let us say for example that you are doing a lesson on 'My house', which describes the rooms in a house and similar ideas. Students can of course describe their own house, but you can extend it by getting them to go onto the web and find other houses to describe. This can be done for added interest but it could also be a way of avoiding embarrassment for some pupils who come from a poor background and are nervous about describing their own actual house. This can easily be a creative exercise if you get them, for example, to imagine that they are a few years older and give them a budget to buy a house. They then have to find a house on the Internet and describe it to the rest of the class. The class can then vote on who chose the best house.

### **8.0. Conclusions**

Creativity, therefore, can be built into your lessons. You just need to get into a mindset where you think of all activities in terms of the three levels of creativity, creativity at the level of new language, creativity at the level of communication, and creativity at the level of new thinking. With every activity that you do, either in the textbook, or ones that you design yourself, work out what level of creativity it is at and then decide whether you need to add other levels to it. Very often you will find creativity at levels 1 and 2 already there, but you will need to add a level 3 activity to bring true creativity. Third order creativity is that where students produce something that is really new for them, not just in terms of language but also in terms of ideas. Since level 3 creativity brings in new thinking, it has the effect of really integrating the new language into the students' psyche. The student is motivated because the new language is not just new language but means something to them personally. For this reason, they will remember and it becomes part of them as a language learner, and, ideally, as a person as well.

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