

Providing Opportunities for Creative Expression in the Classroom: A Study

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Abstract

Free and creative expression is vital in a child's life for it enriches language development and becomes the basis for further learning. Providing opportunities for such learning in the classroom is critical. This paper has two parts. The first part provides an understanding of free and creative expression from teachers' point of view. This understanding is gained through conversations with a handful of language teachers who teach classes five and six across three government schools. The conversations reveal two points: (a) teachers feel that providing opportunities for creative expression is essential; they do not do it for want of time, (b) teachers believe that creativity refers to uniqueness; hence only some children are capable of creative expressions. The second part of the study uses three activities to analyse free and creative expression in class six students across three government schools located north of Mandya, Karnataka. These activities are (a) blank sheet activity, (b) look at a picture and write about it, and (c) read a small script and draw a picture. Children's free and creative expression was analysed using scoring guides, and observations were made along with some reflections. The study concludes by highlighting the fears and concerns of the children with regard to creative expression, and its implications for teacher learning.

Introduction

This paper is based on the version of the presentation made at the seminar "Teachers in the Current Scenario of School Education", held at Mysore in April 2018.

As per the National Curriculum Framework (2005), one of the critical goals of education is to encourage creative and free-thinking among learners. Children come to the school with the ability to think in different ways. In schools, however, there is very little opportunity to think in different ways. In classrooms that provide opportunities for free self-expression, thinking becomes creative. However, when we tell children to write something they ask, "Sir, why do you want us to write in our own sentences? Own sentence means writing about what we know, isn't it?" This question is not surprising, because teachers provide students with readymade answers to their questions and insist that they regurgitate the same answers in their exams. This emphasis on "write what I tell you to write", kills the children's ability for natural and spontaneous expression. Children end up thinking in a very uniform manner. There is a glaring need to demonstrate to teachers how they can provide opportunities in the classroom for creative expression. This paper presents a study, based on three classroom activities intended to provide opportunities for free and creative expression among children.

The paper has two parts. In the first part, I try to understand the teachers' views on opportunities for free expression in the classroom. This broad understanding is sought through conversations with a few teachers. The second part of the paper describes three activities for promoting creative expressions in the classrooms of

Class 6 students across three schools. The three schools were in rural Mandya North Block (Karnataka), and were chosen because of the rapport established with the schools, teachers and students. The observations and reflections following each of these activities have been discussed briefly.

Teachers' View of Free and Creative Expression in the Classroom

We had conversations with a handful of teachers to understand their views on free and creative expression and the opportunities for it in the classroom. Some questions around which the conversation focused were:

- Are students able to engage with their ideas in their own language (either in picture form or written form)?
- What anxieties and concerns do students experience when engaging with their ideas?
- Do students draw from their experiences within or outside the classroom?
- Does their free writing show the dominant influence of home language or school language? How is their writing structured?
- Are the students able to write what they express orally?

Observations

Notions of creative expression: Teachers held the view that creative activity means the text has to be creative in the sense of it being unique. They did not look at the concept from a language development perspective. So, they felt that creative expression is shown only by some smart children.

Importance of opportunities for Creative expression: Teachers felt it was important to provide opportunities for creative expressions. One teacher shared that the film "Taare Zameen Par" had left an impression on his mind about the importance of creative expression and providing opportunities for it in the class.

Abilities of children for free and creative expression: In one school, as part of an annual competition, students were told to draw anything they wanted, without giving them a theme (this was a departure from earlier years when they had been given a theme). Despite the absence of a theme, the drawings of the students did not show much difference when compared to the previous years. Most of the pictures were based on themes already taught in the classroom, or by their caregivers and friends. Further, when the students were asked to draw an image of their choice, or write about something they liked, they went back to the teacher, asking, "What should I do?", "I don't know". Another teacher felt that even though children had the ability for creative expression, it was difficult for them to engage in creative writing because they were unable to write grammatically correct sentences. The foundations for free expression were not yet in place. Teachers also felt that students needed clear instructions. Some teachers felt that children who come to study in government schools have no original writing skills. It is clear from this that they interpreted creativity as originality.

Opportunities for creative expression in the classroom: Some teachers felt that they gave many opportunities for free expression in the classroom. Textbooks also provide opportunities for creative writing. Most of the lessons end with activities that encourage spontaneous thinking and writing. These activities are given at the end of the lesson and are not assessed. Teachers felt that these activities could not be taken up in the

classroom for want of time. Competitions conducted in schools also provide opportunities for creative thinking and writing. For example, in the "Prathibha Karanji Program" (a program organized by the Government of Karnataka, and conducted at the cluster, block, district and state level, to provide a common platform to students for various competitions), students participate in essay writing, debating, drawing, storytelling, and so on. This program also fosters free thinking. The teaching community, however, felt that these activities were led by the teachers, instead of the students engaging in them independently.

Influence of home language on free thinking: Teachers expressed the view that they encouraged the use of home language in learning. However, the writings of the children did not reflect their home language. Teachers did not find this strange, because according to them, children come to school to learn the standard language that is used in textbooks.

In a nutshell, teachers felt that nurturing free and creative expression is something desirable but not doable because of lack of time, limited abilities of children, poor knowledge of grammar, lack of originality in writing skills, and teacher's own interpretation of creative expression. These views have significant implications for teacher learning as they look at free creative expression from a language development perspective. We know that creative expression is not something special, nor are only some children capable of it. However, teachers need to interweave their lessons with opportunities for creative expression; this can be achieved by implementing the activities given at the end of the lesson, or designing some activities of their own. More importantly, the consequences of not giving such opportunities need to be highlighted when talking to teachers.

Children's Creative Writing Activities

It was essential to demonstrate to the teachers how opportunities for free and creative expression could be fashioned in the class, and also the fears and concerns of the children to engage with creativity. To this end, three activities were organized for Class 6 students in three government schools located in Mandya North Block.

Activity 1: Blank Sheet Writing

In this activity, each child was given an A4 size blank sheet and told: "Write whatever you feel like writing." Many of them asked, "Sir, what should I write?" The instruction that they should write whatever they felt like was reiterated repeatedly. Some of them continued to say, "Sir, give me something." I said again, "Write down what you want". Some children asked, "Sir, should I draw the margin?" I told them to do as they pleased. One or two children pretended to write something, but their sheets continued to be blank.

Observations and Reflections.

- Children were at a loss when they were told to draw or write whatever they wanted. This feeling of being lost is because they are used to being told what they should write about.
- Some children copied pictures from books they were familiar with (this included their textbooks). However, they still did not know what to write about. They found copying easier and more enjoyable.
- Most of them chose to draw pictures on the sheet rather than write. Among the children who had drawn pictures, very few wrote about them. They were,

however, able to talk about the pictures.

- Some children drew small pictures in the corner of their sheets. When asked why they had left most of the sheet blank, they replied, "what if the whole sheet is spoilt?" Children did not value what they drew or wrote and were afraid of making mistakes.
- More than half the children drew a border on the paper and painted a picture of a house. When asked whether it was their house, they replied in the negative. A few children wrote simple sentences consisting of three to four words, such as "This is my house", "I like my house", and so on. Less than ten children wrote about their pictures, but they did not write more than four sentences.
- Five children had written poetry, (/ನಾನು ಕಣ್ಣು ಹೊಡೆದೇ ಅಪ್ಪುಮಾಡಿದಳು ಕಣ್ಣು ಉಸುನೆ /'naanu kannu hoDede avaLu maDidaLu kannu sanne' "I winked my eye and she signaled with her eye".) When I asked, "Where did you see this and what does it mean?", the student answered, "On the back of an auto", but could not say what it meant.
- Gender stereotypes manifested in the drawings as some girls drew Rangolis (decorative designs made on the floor).

So, children with some prompting, can engage in creative expression.

Activity 2: Write About a Shown picture

The second activity involved free writing and was carried out with 36 children. They were given two pictures and were asked to select one picture and write about it. Both pictures presented scenarios that were familiar to the children. A scoring guide was prepared to analyse the free

Table 1
Scoring Guide for Analysis of Free Expression

Level	Nature of Free Expression
Level 1	Able to write the name of the picture in a single word. For example: ಹಸು / hasu / (cow); ಗುಡಿಸಲು / gudisalu / (hut)
Level 2	Able to describe the picture using simple sentences. For Example: ದನಕೆಕೆಸನಾನಮಾಡಿಸುತ್ತದಾನೆ / danakke snana baaDisuttidaane / (He is bathing the cow.); ಮಕ್ಕಳುಆಟವಾಡುತ್ತದಾರೆ / makkaLu aatavaaduttidaare / (The children are playing.)
Level 3	Able to describe events, feelings and other emotions using compound sentences. Example: ದನಕೆಕೆತುಂಬಿಸಿಬಿಸಿಗಿರುವುದರಿಂದರೈತನುಗೊಸನಾನಮಾಡಿಸಲುಹೇಳುತ್ತ /Danakke tumb sekhe giruvudarinda raitanige sn na m disalu h litu / (Since the cow was feeling hot, it told the farmer to bathe it.) ಮಕ್ಕಳುಮಧ್ಯಾಯದಲ್ಪಿತುಂಬಿಸಿಷಯಂದಜೀರಾಗೊಕ್ಕಿರುವುದರಿಂದ ತೆತ್ತದಾರೆ / makkaLu madhyaanadalli tumba khusiyinda jooraagi kirucikondudu aaduttidaare / (In the afternoon, the children are playing with a lot of merriment and cheer.)
Level 4	Able to create a story based on the picture, write the theme, describe the characters and events, and summarize using complex sentences. For example ಒಂದುಬಿಸಿಗೊಯಲೊದನವೊಂದಕೆತುಂಬಿಸಿಯಾಗುತ್ತಿತ್ತುಆಗಲೊಗೊಬಿಸಿ ಕೊಳೆಯೊಂದುಬಂದಿತು, ಅದಕೆದನಮತನಕಪಟವನುಹೇಳಿಕೊಂಡು... ಸನಾನಮಾಡಿಸಿಕೊಂಡಿತು/ ondu beesigeyalli danavondakke tumba sekheyaagittu aga allige baatuko oliyondudu banditu. Adakke danavu tanna kaddavannu heed koddu... Snaana maadisikodditu / (One summer a cow was feeling very hot. At that time, a duck came there. The cow confided its problems (to the duck) ... and took its bath. ...)

Observations and Reflections

- Most of the children were at level 2. They restricted themselves to writing simple sentences. Although they knew the grammatical structure of Kannada their fear of written grammar stopped them from attempting longer sentences.
- About 15 percent of the children were at Level 3. They wrote five to six simple sentences.
- Only 3 percent of the children were at Level 4. They were able to write a story and use complex sentences.

- The children reported that as soon as they saw the pictures, a lot of ideas came to their mind. However, they had difficulty in framing their ideas into sentences using correct grammar.
- When the children were told to talk about the picture, they used more of their home language. The use of home language was more pronounced in the writing of the children whose free expression was at the third level compared to other levels.

In a nutshell, this activity shows that children can freely express their thoughts using simple sentences. However, their fear of making grammatical mistakes acts as a barrier to free expression in the written form.

Activity 3: Read the Passage and Draw a Picture to Convey its Message

The children were told to read the passage given in the following box and draw a picture for it.

I saw a poster which had images of a pair of spectacles and of a woman holding a broom. When I asked my friend about the poster, he said that it stood for "Swatch Bharath" and the spectacles symbolized Gandhiji's spectacles and stood for Gandhiji's dream of Swatch Bharath. ನಾನು ನನ್ನ ಸ್ನೇಹಿತನಿಗೆ ಭೌತಿಕ ಪತ್ರವನ್ನು ಕೊಟ್ಟೆ. ಅದರಲ್ಲಿ ಒಂದು ಚಿತ್ರವಿತ್ತು. ಅದು ಒಂದು ಜೋಡಿ ಕನ್ನಡಿ ಮತ್ತು ಒಂದು ಮಹಿಳೆಯನ್ನು ಹಿಡಿದು ಬ್ರೂಮ್. ನಾನು ಅದರ ಬಗ್ಗೆ ಕೇಳಿದಾಗ, ಅವನು ಅದು "ಸ್ವಾಚ್ ಭಾರತ" ಎಂದು ಹೇಳಿದನು ಮತ್ತು ಕನ್ನಡಿ ಗಾಂಧೀಜಿಯವರ ಕನ್ನಡಿಗಳನ್ನು ಸೂಚಿಸುತ್ತದೆ ಮತ್ತು ಅವರ ದೃಷ್ಟಿಯನ್ನು ಸೂಚಿಸುತ್ತದೆ.

The expressions of children were examined using the following guide:

Table 2
Scoring Guide for Analysis of Free Expression

Level	Nature of Free Expression
Level 1	Draw a picture of spectacles or a broom.
Level 2	Convey what is written in the box by drawing a picture of a woman with a broom or spectacles, along with Gandhi.

Observations and Reflections

- Initially, some children were hesitant to draw, but they were motivated when they saw the other children drawing.
- The free expressions of most children were at Level 1. They drew a picture either of a pair of spectacles or a broom.
- Children found this activity challenging. Although they were able to read the sentences, they faced difficulties in making sense of them. Less than 5

percent of the children were able to explain what the passage meant.

- It is a bit difficult to say whether the findings would have been any different if the passage had been written in a local language.

Conclusions

The observations and reflections from the three activities lead to the following conclusions:

- Given the opportunity to engage in free expression, there seem to be three barriers that need to be addressed. The first is the fear of doing something wrong in a general sense ("what if I am writing/saying something wrong?") the second is the overwhelming fear of being grammatically incorrect, and the third is inadequate development of decoding skills in reading and writing
- Children are eager to create something new but are not very confident and need support and appreciation.
- The meaning of creative expression needs to be seen in the context of language development. Creative expression is not something that is unique in the general sense. It is unique to the child, that is, it brings forward something that may not have been expressed before by that child. For the child, expressing something creatively is a new experience. We should move away from the idea of creative expression as being something big and unique.
- Engaging children in free and creative expression activities given at the end of the lesson provides ample opportunities for facilitating free and creative expression. This is the minimum that teachers need to do. Children are creative and require to be challenged at every stage. Activities that do not challenge them are likely to bring down their level of interest.
- That teachers encourage the use of

home language in free expression at the oral level is to be recognized and acknowledged. However, teachers need to see value in this and use it as a scaffolding for free writing.

- In conclusion, this study demonstrates the idea that all children are capable of free expression and this has to be actively encouraged in the classroom. The observations in this study act as

pointers to teacher learning to enable this. It is clear that in free expression, the emphasis must be more on meaning-making rather than the correctness of grammatical structures and build on the free and creative expression of children.

References

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