

**Creativity as a form of
autonomy:
broadening 'possibilities' within
constraints**

Tan Bee Tin

University of Auckland

New Zealand (Email: tb.tin@auckland.ac.nz)

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Thonburi, Thailand.)



My take on 'autonomy'

What others say

My own experience

Autonomy

- Ability and willingness to take charge of one's own learning (e.g. Littlewood 1996, Dickinson 1995)
- Taking charge of/ taking responsibility for/ taking control over one's own learning individually and collectively (e.g. Benson 2007)
- Making informed choices about learning processes and learning (Nunan, 1996)

Various types of autonomy

- Autonomy as a communicator, autonomy as a learner, autonomy as a person (Littlewood, 1996)
- Low level & high level autonomy (Littlewood, 1996)
- Degrees of autonomy (e.g. Nunan 1997)
- Versions of autonomy (Benson 1997, 2007) –psychological, technical, political

My take on 'autonomy':

- A more 'psychological' version
- Autonomy is a universal human potential
- Autonomy is triggered by circumstances.
- Students can demonstrate autonomy under certain circumstances in various creative forms which we do not normally recognize and in various levels and degrees (macro, micro)

My personal experiences:

Students I have encountered in my various studies (2013a, 2013b).


- Thailand
- Nepal
- Burma (Myanmar)




Story I: from Thailand

A student from Thailand (Tan Bee Tin, 2013a)


- A surprising failure experienced outside the class triggered his interest in studying English and made him willing to exercise his autonomy.
- Some conditions → can trigger a desire to exercise one's 'autonomy'




“SI: But before that (incident), I was lazy. I was waiting for my dad to push me into English environment.”




“SI: But when I had the inspiration to study English, then I didn’t wait for any command. I knew what I had to do.”



“SI: When I wake up, I turn on the English radio. I tried to spend my time in the English environment, even thinking.”

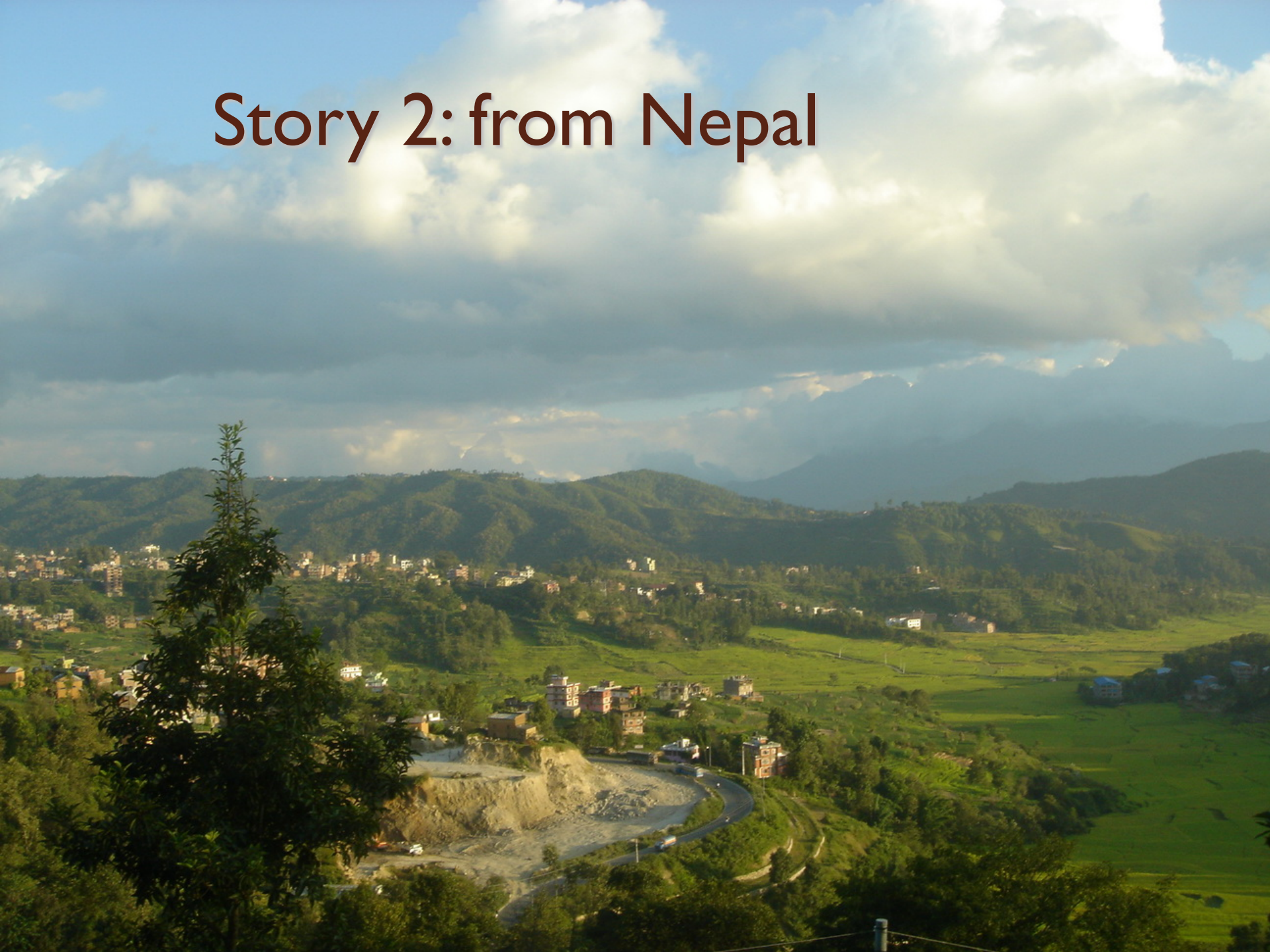


“SI: I don’t have anyone speaking English with me too. I speak Thai one sentence (...) I think in English to practise my brain speaking English.”




“SI: because I think that when I’m in the real situation, I can use it straight away, immediately, without thinking so much because my brain has practised it all the time.”

Story 2: from Nepal

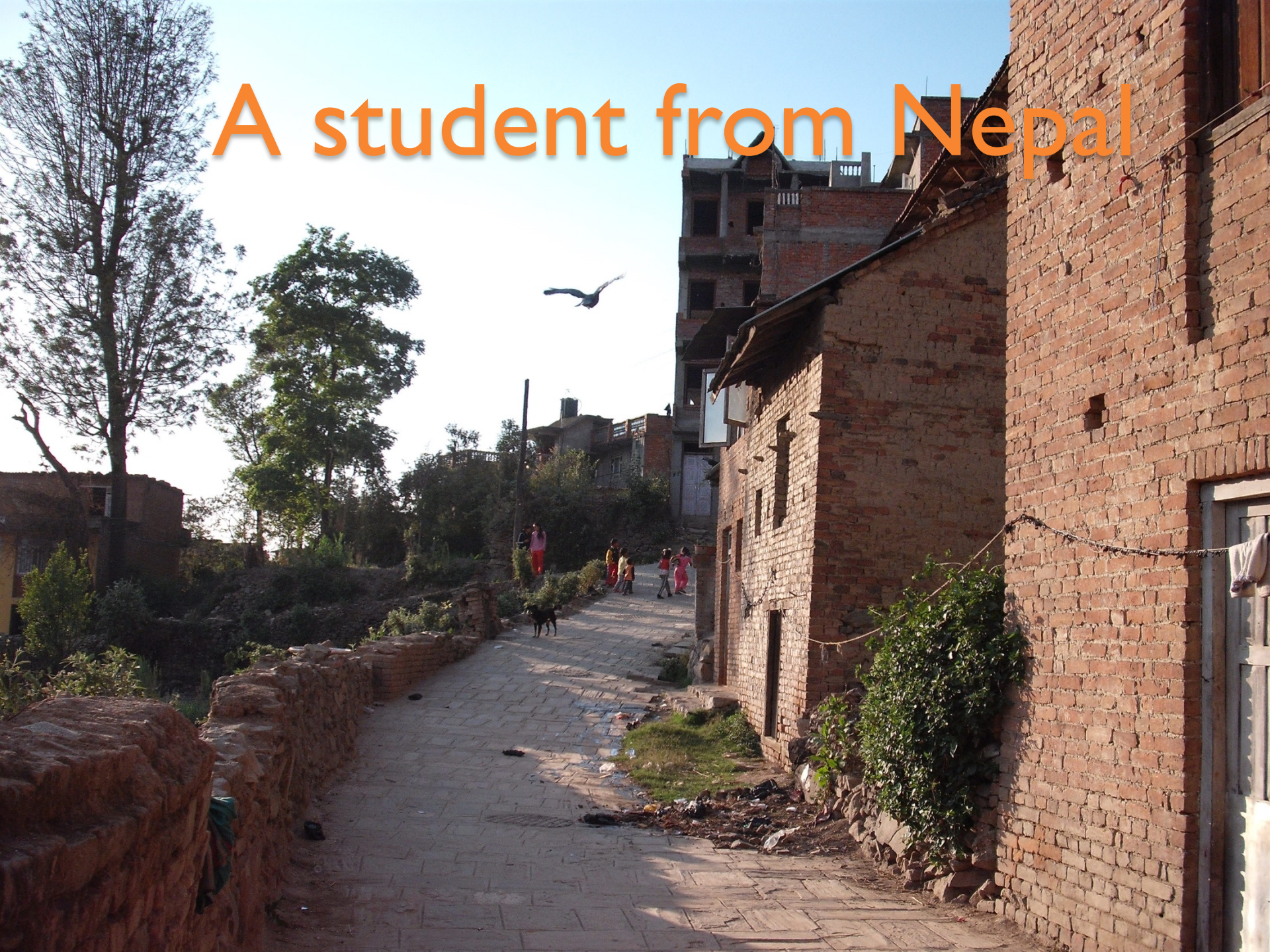



Students from Nepal (Tan Bee Tin, 2013b):

- Students demonstrating autonomy in various forms in highly constrained learning/teaching environment


- 
- Students continue to seek learning opportunities in their home environment, using family members, siblings and others in their community
 - demonstrating autonomy ‘in forms which ‘we’ do not easily recognize’ (Holliday, 2005, p. 87).

A student from Nepal







“S2: Whatever experience I have in the classroom and in this college, I express it in front of my parents when we are having dinner. I usually tell the joke (the teacher tells us in class) when we are having dinner and they laugh. They congratulate me.”




“S2: I usually look at the dictionary. Actually I don’t have a dictionary but I borrow it from my friends and I look at the dictionary. If I get any difficult words, I take the help of the dictionary and I also have my teachers and my guiders in my locality and they also help me to make my English good.”



“S2: ‘There are so many strong English words in the textbook. I just try to use them in my writing that my teacher gives me. I include those words so that the memory of those words will be kept in my mind and I will never forget it.’”

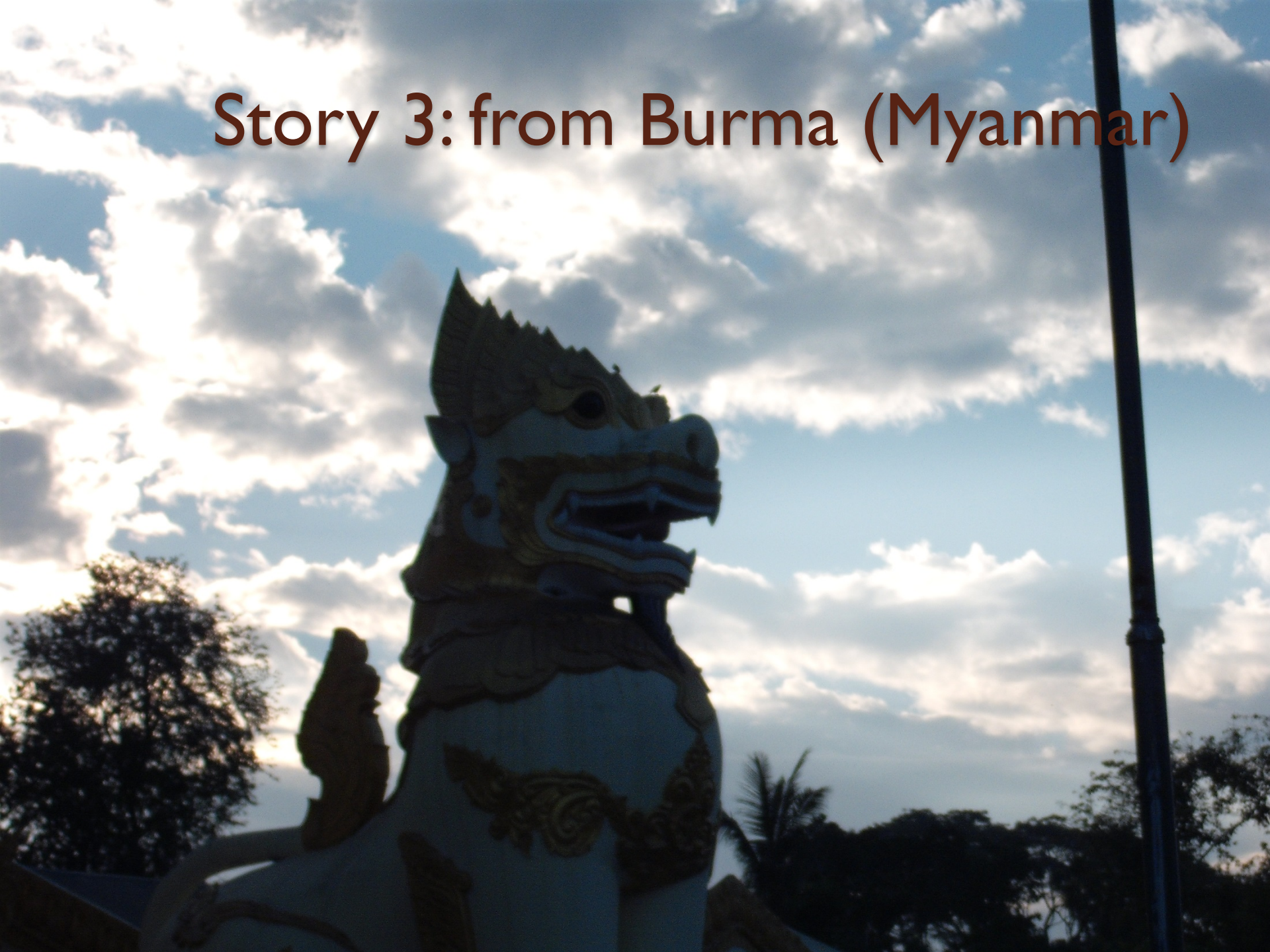


“S2: If there is any mistake that I write, you know I try to read it once again. If I get any mistake there I correct it.”



“S2: My sister encourages me to write about something. She often gives me some topics to write and I write. I write whatever I know I write and she checks and she reads and if it is good she congratulates me. If it’s not good she suggests to me to make it good.”

Story 3: from Burma (Myanmar)





Story 3: from Burma (Myanmar)

Creating learning opportunities outside the class and demonstrating autonomy in various creative forms

‘Creative autonomy’



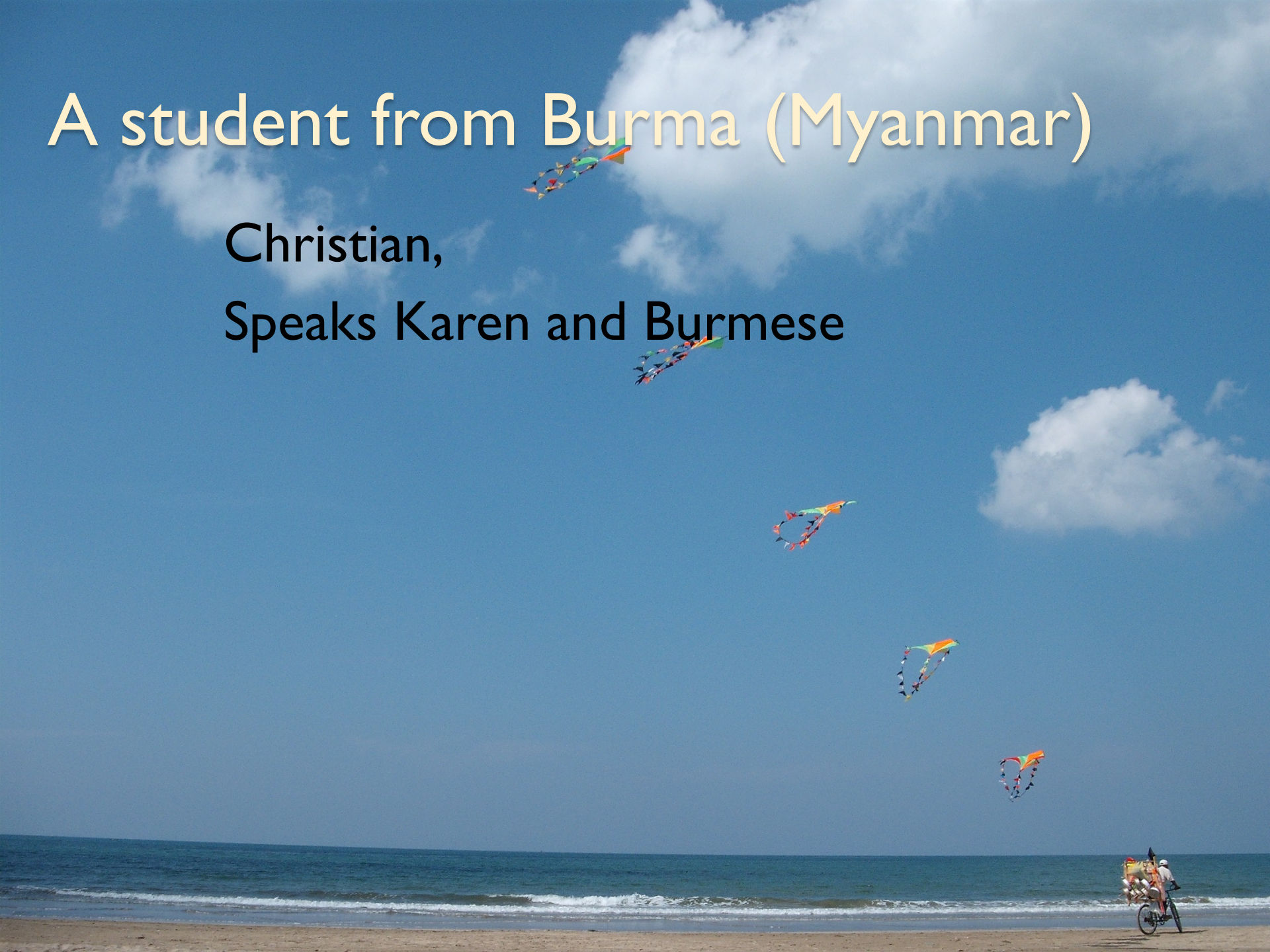
A student from Burma (Myanmar)

- Unfavorable circumstances at home: lack of family support, busy schedule at the restaurant

A student from Burma (Myanmar)

Christian,

Speaks Karen and Burmese



A student from Burma (Myanmar)

- Using Karen, Burmese, English Bibles to improve her English while working at her restaurant despite lack of English resources available.



Using bibles in three languages:

- Read the bible in all three languages: Burmese, Karen, English
- Worked out the meaning in the English text by comparing it with the other two.
- Displayed some quotes in all three languages on the whiteboard at her restaurant (e.g. 'Like food we eat to survive, there is spiritual food to give strength.')
- a foreigner (regular customer) gave her other quotes from the bible (in English) to write on the board for 6 months
- an opportunity to speak with the foreigner in English.

My take on 'autonomy'

- Autonomy is a universal human potential
- Autonomy, like other forms of human knowledge, is deeply contextual and is triggered by circumstances.
- Autonomy can be demonstrated in various creative and innovative forms which we do not normally recognise and in various levels (micro level – macro level)

But

- All these various forms of autonomy I have seen in those students take place outside the class, initiated by students and triggered by various circumstances.
- Inside the class, they may look ‘passive’ due to the various circumstances (e.g. T-dominated talk, task types and teaching approaches etc)

Title of my talk

**“Creativity as a form of autonomy:
Broadening ‘possibilities’ within
constraints”**

- Circumstances for exercising autonomy:
Creative tasks and constraints

Outline

1. What is creativity?
2. Why is it important for language learning and autonomy?
3. How? – creative tasks, constraints,
4. Examples
5. Some studies
6. Conclusion

I. Creativity: what?

Ability to produce new valuable ideas

Various creative processes:

- exploratory thinking,
- combinational thinking,
- transformational thinking

(Boden, 2001)

2. Creativity: Why?


- the ability to produce new valuable ideas or the need to 'say something new' → language learning and autonomy?

Creativity and language learning:

Complex dynamic theory:

The need to say something new →

- stretch language
- explore language
- develop complex grammar

- 
- Language grows in complexity over time to deal with complex tasks (Lakkaraju et al 2008).
 - Linguistic signs are ‘continually created to meet new needs and circumstances’ (Toolan 2003).

- Creative processes (e.g. combinational, exploratory, transformational) → cognitively challenge ss, desirable for language learning.

Creativity and autonomy:

Creativity as a form of exercising autonomy
(making creative choices concerning
language)

Linguistic creativity is part of 'autonomy as
a communicator', 'autonomy as a person'
(Littlewood, 1996)

3. Creativity: How?

Creative tasks

- 3.1. Focus on unknown/new meaning rather than on known meaning
- 3.2. Focus on partially-defined goal rather than well-defined goal
- 3.3. Disciplined and imaginative use of constraints in creative tasks

3.1. known meaning vs. unknown meaning

- Creating the need to say something new (something new to self)
- Making the familiar unfamiliar
- Helping students to explore and transform language as they use it to construct new meaning.

Example 1: Information gap task

A: see the
whole TV
episode

B: miss half the
episode

36B // SOAP OPERA

8.50 - Pop
Barry
through
letters
9.00 - News: V
9.25 - Mian
"Nobody
ever". Cr
Tubbs ar.
to homic
three p
teens g
through
10.15 - The
Fi

This evening: The continuing drama
of Los Angeles (episode 9)

Los Angeles is a television serial
about the Holt family.
The parents (picture centre) live on
a ranch outside Los Angeles.
They have four children: (from left
to right at top) Billy and his wife Sue;
Becky and her husband Tom; Mark;
(bottom left) Linda.

An episode of **Los Angeles** is on TV at the moment. You have watched
it from the beginning, and you have seen this.

Mark

Mark

Billy

Billy and Sue

Becky

Becky

Linda and Mrs Holt

Mr Holt

Mr Holt

Your partner has missed half the episode and he's going to ask you what has happened.

Example 1: Info gap task

- Known meaning (to self)

- Unknown (to other)



36B // SOAP OPERA

8.50 - **Pop** - Barry through letters
9.00 - **News** - V
9.25 - **Mia n** "Nobody ever". Cr Tubbs ar. to homic three p teenag through
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Billy and Sue

Becky

Becky

Linda and Mrs Holt

Mr Holt

Mr Holt

Your partner has missed half the episode and he's going to ask you what has happened.

- Student A: Look at page 1
- Student B: Look at page 2

Don't show your information to your peer!

Signal redundancy (Smith 2008)

- Lack of desire to create new meaning and new form
- Lack of desire to learn and invent a complex signal or a complex language.
- If the meaning to be communicated is already known, why would there be a need for social actors to create and learn a complex language?

3.2. Well-defined goal vs. Partially-defined goal

Even when the meaning to be communicated is not pre-given

- Imaginary tasks, role-play activities, games often falling flat ...
- Students avoid using new language items but use known, familiar, safe utterances
- The task gives too much freedom,
- The task has a well-planned goal (i.e. ss know what the final outcome will be).

Pre-given topic
Well-defined goal
Freedom



Retrieving known,
familiar, safe utterances

'Cognitive fixation' tendency

- When faced with an unknown situation, we tend to retrieve the known to solve the unknown if we have too much freedom.

Creativity block

Teacher: Be creative! Be imaginative!

Student: !!!

How?

How might we help students

- to explore and transform language?
- to broaden possibilities and test their linguistic boundaries?
- to exercise autonomy (making creative choices)?

How?

Focus on known
meaning



Focus on unknown
meaning

Well-defined goal



Partially ill-defined goal

3.3. Disciplined and imaginative use of constraints

- Idea generation
- Constraints revealed or discovered
- Idea exploration



4. Examples

I. Idea generation phase

- Generating forms without knowing what they will be used for
 - i. On a piece of paper, write: ‘Names of objects’ (e.g. mobile phone, watch, window, car); ‘Natural elements’ (e.g. storm, sun, flower); ‘Names of animals’ (e.g. kangaroo).

2. Idea exploration

- Reveal the constraints

ii. Let's go back to the list of nouns earlier

Use them in the following sentence:

- Formal constraints:

If I were a/an, I would

- Semantic constraint:

To express your emotion to someone you love/hate

Example



If I were a window,

Example



If I were a window,
I would find every
crack to get inside
your heart.

Example

If I were a car



Example



If I were a car,
our mileage of
love would
continue even
after the fuel of
desire had run
out.

- Partially/ill-defined goal
- Chance occurrences and allow learners to make more creative choices

Creative tasks (Tan Bee Tin, 2013c)

1. Idea-generation (generating ideas without knowing what you will be using them for)

- To prevent 'cognitive fixation' tendency

2. Idea-exploration (exploring ideas generated earlier within constraints)

- To transform known meaning, making meaning in retrospect,
- To make creative choices with language

5. Some Studies

- How does 'constraint' help students to make creative choices with language (exploratory, combinational, transformational thinking)?
- 2 studies

Study 1: Taiwanese students

- Two Taiwanese students studying at a university in New Zealand (close friends, use Chinese in informal situations)
- Data collected by Tzu Ning Huang (2013) (replication of my earlier 2011 study).
- Two writing tasks: high constraint, low constraint (pair work)
- Data: written product and processes (transcripts of discussions)

Two creative writing tasks:

1. Acrostics (High constraints)
2. Similes (Low constraints)

Acrostics

**T
I
M
E**

Rules

- 1. every line must start with the letter (formal constraint)**
- 2. the whole poem must be related to the key word 'TIME' (semantic constraint)**

Similes

Hope is like parking spaces.

.....
.....

Rules:

- 1. Provide two reasons for the comparison.**

Examples

Acrostics

Jump
Out of
Your sorrow.

Similes

My father is like a rock.
His chin is sharp.
He looks at me from the
top of a mountain.
He is very old.

(Spiro 2004: 52)

Two tasks (pair work)

Acrostic

Simile

T

Hope is like parking spaces.

I

.....

M

.....

E

Data: Written products

Acrostic

The one thing that
Inhibits
Marriage to last
Eternally

Simile

Hope is like parking spaces
Because it is hard to get and
People steal each other's parking spaces
Like destroying their hope.

Data: Process (Transcripts)

I. Acrostic

The one thing that

Inhibits

Marriage to last

Eternally

Data: Process (Transcripts) (Acrostic)

- Idea generation (generating ideas and words randomly without knowing what they will be used for. Exploratory thinking)
- Imposing self-initiated constraints
- Working within task constraints (formal and semantic)
- Idea exploration within constraints
- More evidence of exploring, combining and transforming language and making more creative choices with their language

Symbols used in transcribing

.... pause

@ laughter

() comments added by the transcriber

aaa translation (from Chinese to English)

aaa original words in English

Data: Process

- 1 N: *What do you think?* 'TIME'
- 2 S: 'Time'...
- 3 N: *Somehow I think of* 'gold'
- 4 S: Yeah... 'money'
- 5 N: *Why? Oh so* 'time is money'...
- 6 S: Hmm...
- 7 N: 'Time'...
- 8 N: Yeah see, 'time is money'. @@
- 9 S: @@... 'Time is money'

10 N: *What else is about 'time'? Uhh...*

11 S: *Let's write it down.*

12 N: *So what were we saying? 'Money'... Oh how about 'marriage'?*

(...)

15 N: *@...Uh...What else?*

16 N: *'Food'...? How does 'food' relate to time? ...*

17 S: *Hmm...*

18 N: *'Money, marriage'...What else? 'Patience'?...*

(...)

22 N: *'Money, marriage, patience'... Time*

24 N: And 'life'.
26 N: 'Love'. Hmm... 'Pressure'...
27 S: Hm. [writing]
28 N: *What else?...* 'Age'... Hmm.....
29 S: Hm.
30 N: 'Study'!
31 S: ... 'universe'?
32 N: 'Universe'? *Good good. That's different. @@*
not bad.
33 S: @@...
34 N: 'Belief'...
35 S: *Why?*
36 N: *because you said 'universe'...* @@
37 S: @@...

- 39 S: *The most basic... 'watch' and...?*
- 40 N: *Oh yeah... 'jewellery'!*
- 41 S: *Uhh why?*
- 42 N: *because you said 'watch'.*
- 43 S: *Oh...@ okay...*
- 44 N: *Hmm... 'forever' ...*
- 45 S: *'Speed'...*
- 46 N: *Ohh!!!*
- 47 N: *Is this physics? @@...*
- 48 S: *Yeah @@ because I read a book recently ...*
- 49 N: *Then how about 'distance'? @@*

Idea generation:

- Generating ideas and words randomly without knowing what they will be used for.
- Exploratory thinking

50 N: *What else? If we change an angle...
something time-related ...
Besides words... some behaviours?*

Imposing self-
initiated constraints

53 N: *'Marriage is a behaviour', right?*

54 N: *Hmm...what else... 'cooking'? ...*

55 S: *Hmm...yeah 'cooking takes time'...*

56 N: *What else?...*

57 S: *Oh that 'minute, second, month, year', and
something like that*

58 N: *Ohh oh....yeah.....(long pauses)*

59 N: *Do you know what I mean if I say 'self-awareness'?*

60 S: *Yeah...*

61 N: *Then write 'self-awareness'.*

- 62 S: *Okay...should we categorize what we write?*
- 63 N: *Yeah this, this, and that...* (pointing at words)
- 64 S: *Yeah...*
- 65 N: *Let's label group 1 group 2...*
- (...)
- 69 S: *Hm..age is more like the 'life' group, group 3*
- 70 N: *Yeah and 'love' as well?*
- 71 S: *And 'patience'?*
- 72 N: *But 'patience' is more like 'belief'...*
- 73 S: *Yeah...*
- 74** N: *And 'love' is more like 'forever'...*

Categorising words

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
Universe Distance Minute Second Hours	Self- awareness Pressure Patience Marriage Love Belief Forever	Life Age	Clock Watch Jewellery Money	Cooking Working Studying

96 N: *Okay. So...we have more words in
group 2. So let's start with group 2...
what do you think?*

Imposing self-initiated
constraints

98 S: *Yeah...*

99 N: *They are all time-related...
(looking at group 2)*

100 S: *..... (pause)*

101 N: *Hmm*

102 S: *I want to write something like...
'My energy'...*

104 N: *I'd like to write 'My' something.... here*

105 S: *Yeah or a verb...*

106 N: *So if we write ... 'My'
But words start with T is hard...*

107 S: *@ yeah...*

108 N: *How about 'the one'?...*

109 S: *The one? Where?*

110 N: *Just... 'the one', starts with T*

111 S: *Oh yeah...we can add many words after the letter*

112 N: *Hmm yes...should be okay if we add only
2 more words... ..*

114 N: *But what if..... but it can only be time-related...*

Idea-exploration:
working within task
constraints (formal
and semantic
constraints)

T
I
My
Energy

The one
I
My (something)
E

116 N: *I just thought of 'eternal'...
because many 'beliefs' are about.....
you know...*

The one
I
My (something)
Eternal

118 S: *I'm think...just...
because 'time may cause marriage to...
prevent marriage from going..... eternally'...*

119 N: *Hmm...prevent?*

120 S: *Yeah...because... M is marriage and
E is...like we said...eternally...*

The one thing
I
Marriage from going
Eternally

122 S: *So if we can start with T ...like....
the one thing...or the one... something...*

123 N: *Oh I know what you mean...so it's
marriage...eternally...*

124 S: *Yeah...*

- 125 N: *So the exact word is 'eternal'?*
- 126 S: *...eternally.*
- 127 N: *Eternally.*
- 128 S: *Oh do we need a noun?*
- 129 N: *Is eternally adjective?*
- 130 S: *Uh...adverb...*
- 131 N: *Okay...so give me a sentence...*
- 132 S: *Ahhh.....*
- 133 N: *Yeah something something eternally ...*
- 134 S: *Hmmm...*
- 135 N: *When do you use eternally?.....*
- 136 S: *It is 'The one thing that prevents marriage going eternally' ... because time has limits...*
- 137 N: *Ohhhhh!!! I see I see. (feeling excited)*
- 138 S: *@@*
- 139 N: *Ohhhhh I see I see now...*

The one thing that prevents
I
Marriage going
Eternally

144 S: or 'the one that...**inhibits**'...?

'inhibit' *is like* 'prevent', right?

146 N: Inhibit?

147 S: Yeah... (checking dictionary)

148 N: Yeah *it starts with* I...

149 N: So '**the one thing**'... *is it too long?*

150 S: *I think it's okay...I'll write it down...*

The one thing that
Inhibits
Marriage going
Eternally

- 152 S:(writing)
- 153 N: @@ it's like writing essay...
so cool...
So what should we say?...
- 154 S: Maybe it's too long?
- 155 N: No no it's fine it's fine. (Reading the sentences)
- 156 S: You think so?
- 157** N: Yeah that's it.

**The one thing that
Inhibits
Marriage going
Eternally**

158 S: Really? Is there better word than 'go'?

159 N: I don't think there's better word than
'go'marriage.....

160 S: To...**hold**?

161 N: To...**sustain**?

162 S: Sustain.....

163 N: **Last!**

164 S: To last. Yes yes '**to last**'! *That'll do.*

165 N: Okay 'last'. *That's it.*

166 S:(writing)

167 S: *Done.*

168 N: *Cool.*

The one thing that
Inhibits
Marriage **g**oing
Eternally

The one thing that
Inhibits
Marriage **t**o **l**ast
Eternally

Process (Transcripts) (Acrostic)

- Idea generation (generating ideas and words randomly without knowing what they will be used for. Exploratory thinking)
- Imposing self-initiated constraints
- Working within task constraints (formal and semantic)
- Idea exploration within constraints
- More evidence of exploring, combining and transforming language and making more creative choices with their language

Task 2 (Simile)

Hope is like parking spaces.

.....

.....

Data: Written product (Simile)

Hope is like parking spaces

Because it is hard to get and

People steal each other's parking spaces

Like destroying their hope.

Data: Process (Simile)

- Retrieving existing experiences (N has too much background knowledge/ experience about parking whereas S doesn't drive)
- Less opportunity for negotiation of meaning
- Less opportunity for exploring and transforming their language and meaning

508 S: So we have to write a simile poem...

509 N: Yeah two to three sentences

510 S: *what do you think?*

511 N: 'people tend to'... 'people tend to'...
umm...*wait, don't write yet ...*

514 S: 'Unpredictable'?

515 N: 'Unpredictable' *I was thinking*
'people tend to steal parking spaces...
take ... tend to take your space
take your spot before you get it'...

516 S: *Why is it like hope?*

517 N: *because 'it's like people taking your hope away'*

518 S: *Ohh!!! I see...*

519 N: Yeah

520 S: *So negative @@...*

521 N: *@@ yeah negative from beginning to the end @...*

522 S: Umm..... 'so people take away other's hope' ...
523 N: 'Like' ...
524 S: 'by taking their spots'? @@
525 N: Yes, *'like they are all in front of you and you watch them take them away so unpredictably'...*
526 S: Oh.....*you seem to know it very well*
527 N: Yeah *personal experience...very bad feeling...*
528 S: @@...
529 N: Uhh.....
530 S: *So how many reasons do we have?*
531 N: *two...one is 'parking spaces are... hard to get', the other is... 'people steal parking spaces from others'...*

535 N: *I think we need 'and'...(watching S write)*

536 S: *Okay..... (writing)*

537 N: *Hmm can I change it a bit?*

538 S: *Yeah yeah sure, go ahead*

539 N: *Okay.....people.....(writing)*

540 S: *Umm.....*

541 N: *And 'people steal.....
people steal each other's'*

542 S: *You really like 'each other' @...*

543 N: *... 'each other's.....parking spaces.....
like destroying their hope'...yeah
(writing)*

- 544 S: *Should we split the sentence?*
- 545 N: *What do you mean?*
- 546 S: *Like writing a poem we have to have.....
different lines...*
- 547 N: *Oh.....we can add the thing in the middle...
the...slash?*
- 548 S: *Yeah yeah..... so do we need the 'and'?*
- 549 N: *These two sentences are already connected by 'and'.
So full stop and then next one?*
- 550 S: *So no 'and'?*
- 551 N: *Yeah why notlike this (writing)*
- 552 S: *Okay done.*
- 553** N: *Yeah.*

Hope is like parking spaces
Because it is hard to get and
People steal each other's parking spaces
Like destroying their hope.

Simile (low constraint)

N: generating ideas
(using her background knowledge and experience about parking)

S: lacks opportunity for transforming those ideas.

Both – not much testing their linguistic boundaries and meaning.

Acrostic (high constraint)

N: generating ideas
(exploratory thinking)

S: transforming ideas
(combinational and transformational thinking)

Both -- engage in linguistic choices, testing their linguistic boundaries

Study 2: NNS Students (university)

A writing task

1. Write about a very good/bad class you had in the past. Describe what happened in that class in details. Make the reader see, feel, and hear the things that made it bad/good.

Expository writing? (EAP writing)

Discourse structure

- Main topic
- Supporting details etc

Sentence structure

There are 3 reasons why First,, Second, Third,

(focus on known meaning)

(predictable outcome: boredom for teacher/ss)

Transforming a traditional EAP writing task into a creative task

- Idea generation phase (writing 1)
- Finding what constraints to impose
Imposing constraints for creativity and autonomy as a communicator
- Idea exploration phase (writing 2)

Adding constraints:

2. Revise what you have written. This time, the word 'teacher' is banned. You are not allowed to use the word 'teacher' in your writing. Look at that bad/good class you have described again and describe in details what happened without using the word 'teacher'.




Constraints imposed:

- Formal constraints: banning the word 'teacher'



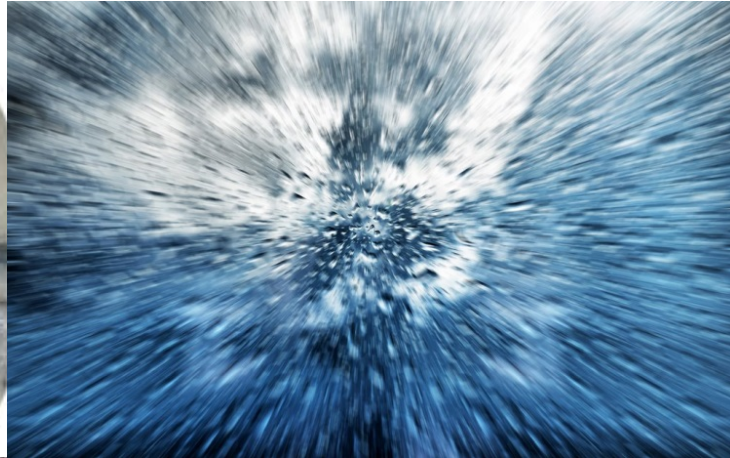
Still writing about the teacher without the word teacher!

- Emergence of 'passive voice' to fulfill the constraint (no teacher) 
- Different knowledge and form triggered by circumstance (i.e. the constraint imposed)

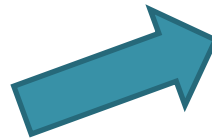
Other emergent properties due to constraint:

- Emergence of various sentence patterns and embedded sentence structures to fulfill the constraint

Constraint → unpredictable/novel
outcome & creative autonomy



Constraint → unpredictable/
novel outcome



Complex
Sentences

A green treble clef symbol is positioned behind the text "Complex Sentences".

6. Conclusion

- Certain features of creative tasks encourage ss to make creative choices, test and broaden their linguistic boundaries:
(the need to say something new, partially ill-defined tasks, constraints, idea generation, idea exploration)
- We can create circumstances to help students to discover and exercise their autonomy and creativity with language.

6. Conclusion

- Learning is about providing space for new meaning to emerge, space in which old meaning is transformed.
- Providing space for learners to retrieve, explore, combine and transform their knowledge, and space for new meaning to emerge.

Thank you.



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