

ILTLP CLASSROOM-BASED INVESTIGATION REPORT

TEACHER'S NAME	SCHOOL	LANGUAGE	YEAR LEVEL
Lisa PORTER	Fairfield High School The Horsley Drive, Fairfield 02 9727 2111	Mandarin Chinese	Year 8

CONTEXT

Fairfield High School is a comprehensive co-educational high school with a current enrolment of 1146 students, including 221 students at the Fairfield Intensive English Centre (IEC). Many students exiting the IEC enrol at Fairfield High School, contributing to the high percentage of Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) students – 93% as at June 30 2007. More than 50 different cultural and linguistic backgrounds are represented at the school, which gives the school a very diverse, multicultural feel.

The school offers Spanish, German, French and Mandarin Chinese. Until this year, students were exposed to different languages in Year 7, and then completed their mandatory 100 hours study of a Language Other Than English (LOTE) in Year 8. However, this year the timetable structure and allocations changed, and LOTE is no longer taught in Year 7. Students do not have a choice of which language they are taught – it depends on which teacher is timetabled onto their class.

Beyond the mandatory 100 hours, elective classes vary from year to year. This year, for example, Spanish is the only language to run elective classes in Years 9 and 11. A number of students, predominantly Arabic- and Vietnamese-speaking, study their home language at the Saturday School of Community Languages. Given the high percentage of students from LBOTE (language background other than English), it is surprising that more students don't see the value in taking on the study of another language. Spanish tends to run because it is perceived by the students as a "cool" language, whereas other languages tend to struggle to make up the numbers to enable a class to run.

The class that was the subject of the investigation is a group of 28 Year 8 students. The group is classified as a "general" or mixed ability class, and is currently undertaking the 100 hours compulsory study of a Language Other Than English (LOTE). The class is a diverse group, reflecting the cultural mix of the school fairly accurately. This class was selected because of the two Year 8 Chinese classes, this is the class that could be trusted to approach the change in routine with a degree of maturity and sincerity.

AREA OF INVESTIGATION

- What was the question you set or in what area of your teaching and/or planning did you locate your investigation?

"Can the perception of Chinese language and culture as 'alien' be broken down through a process of reflection?"

The purpose of the investigation was to attempt to demystify Chinese culture by comparing it directly with the students' background culture and language, rather than having them make links with an intermediary culture that they may only partially understand, or have had little exposure to. Australian culture is still examined; however, by drawing links between a students' background culture and Chinese culture, some of the misconceptions that Chinese is a totally "alien", "other" culture may be debunked.

- Why did you choose this area to investigate?

As outlined above, Fairfield High School presents a fairly unique sociolinguistic profile. Regardless of the subject being taught, each lesson is an exercise in intercultural interaction. The school almost has its own metalanguage due to the broad cultural mix. I have heard students from a variety of backgrounds calling “Yallah!” to exhort friends (not necessarily Arabic-speaking ones!) to hurry up. “TT” is used as an insult amongst the students, being derived from an Assyrian term used for newcomers. While there is much less racial or cultural tension than people outside the school expect, students do make broad generalisations about people of other cultures. Comments such as, “Of course they’re good at school, they’re Asian,” and, “The Assyrian boys are so noisy”, may regularly be heard. Students do not necessarily identify as “Australian”, and may be completely unfamiliar with aspects of Australian culture or the English language to which their teachers draw comparisons.

Cultural identity and nationality is quite important to these students. While the more recent arrivals are very quick to let the world know when they become Australian citizens, they all maintain connections with their background language and culture.

Students find themselves negotiating between languages and cultures every day, without acknowledging this remarkable skill. For example, students function in the Australian school system, spend time with friends from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, act as interpreters for less fluent family members, and participate in family and community cultural life. This is an extraordinary skill set for a 14 year old, for which they rarely give themselves credit!

Despite the intercultural ability of the students, considerable resistance to Chinese has been experienced – it is not seen by the students as a “cool” or “useful” language. The students frequently make assumptions about Chinese culture and Chinese people: “They eat dogs in China.” “Everything is ‘Made in China’.” “Chinese people are all good at maths.” Chinese culture and language is considered by the students to be completely “other” – outside their experience and terms of reference. At least once a month, the cry of, “Why am I learning this? I’m never going to China,” crops up somewhere in the classroom. Students at this age do not appreciate the importance of China as a trade and business partner, so they see little point in making the effort to understand Chinese language and culture. The purpose of the investigation was to attempt to break down some of the cultural preconceptions and stereotypes, and draw immediate links with students’ own experience.

- What aspect of intercultural language and learning was included?

This investigation “invites students to stand back or decentre from their own linguistic and cultural perspective to consider diverse perspectives of others” (ILTLP Conference notes, Day 1, page 9).

The investigation aimed to bring to students an awareness of the fact that they are called upon to negotiate and interpret, not only language, but also culture, in their day-to-day lives.

- How did this translate into planning?

The key was to invest time in the classroom to actually examine the students’ own cultural and linguistic identity, and to explore the significance of aspects of language and culture. Rather than simply presenting language and cultural elements as “this is how it is in China,” we began to take a step further and discuss how it related to the students’ own experience.

An example of this is the family structure and respectful terms of address in Chinese language and culture – students from a number of different language backgrounds were able to identify with this. Similarly, students from other language backgrounds were able to identify with Chinese script being non-Roman, as their background language is also in a non-Roman script (e.g., Arabic or Cyrillic). While they still see Chinese characters (*Hanzi*) as “hard”, they can see that this aspect of Chinese language is not unheard of.

Exercise books were purchased to give students a journal for reflection. Students were provided with focus questions to guide their reflection, as they are not in the habit of thinking about their own identity or learning processes.

- What changes did you make to your regular practice?

Discussion and questioning of key cultural and linguistic features was planned and encouraged. The students are not at a point where these discussions can take place in the target language. However,

they were given time to express and discuss their assumptions and thoughts. Rather than focusing mostly on language-based work, more time and thought was given to how linguistic features express certain cultural elements. I had planned to record these discussions. However, the students were unexpectedly resistant to this idea.

Time for written reflection was programmed. The program was derailed somewhat by the unexpected arrival of a prac student, and much of the time allocated for the project did not eventuate. However, some reflection took place, but it took place more at the end of the unit of work rather than being interwoven with the content.

CLASSROOM PRACTICE

- How did you present this area of investigation in your classroom teaching and learning?

The students were explicitly told about the project, my place in it, and the purpose of my investigation. I shared with them the experience of realising that no one in my family or friendship group shares my cultural and linguistic profile. I opened a discussion on the unique nature of our school and the opportunities it presents to interact with such a vast range of languages and cultures, and let them know that we would not simply be examining the “what” of language and culture, but extending ourselves to explore the “why” and “how”. I took the stance that no cultural feature is wrong or abnormal, just different, and that differences should be explored and accepted. The reflection journals were presented to them as books in which there could be no wrong answers.

- What did you change or modify in the content, tasks and teaching processes to implement your investigation question?

The content of the program did not change, as language and cultural points are dictated by the syllabus. Tasks and teaching processes differed in that there was more opportunity provided for group discussion and personal reflection. The key change was in questioning – again, rather than simply presenting language and cultural elements as “this is how it is in China,” students were challenged to reflect upon how these elements compared with their own experience. For example, during the unit on “Eating and Drinking”, we explored Chinese eating habits, including the use of chopsticks, communal dishes and social etiquette such as how guests are treated. Students reflected on their own dining habits – the key question here was “do you behave the same way at every meal?”

- How did the class react to this?

Students responded very well to the opportunities for group discussion. Students who do not regularly contribute to class discussions provided valuable input. They enjoyed the challenge presented by some of the questions – I think the fact that I was genuinely interested in their answers and the “no wrong answers” policy made them feel comfortable enough to publicly discuss aspects of their lives that they might otherwise keep private.

The students were enthused about the reflection journals on a number of levels: first, that they were being given to them as opposed to them having to buy a book; second, that they would be remaining at school (one less book to carry!). Some students were hesitant to write personal reflections – this was not out of reluctance to share, as when I questioned them verbally, they were willing and able to articulate their thoughts. Rather, these were students who struggle with independent writing, or who lack motivation to write.

The students began realising things about themselves they had not previously considered. Most of them move between cultures smoothly, exhibiting appropriate behaviour in a variety of cultural situations. For example, they all expressed the need to behave differently at meals when guests or extended family, are present, or when eating with friends of people of other cultural backgrounds. The two self-proclaimed “Aussies” in the class began to realise how much they have picked up of other languages and cultures just by attending the school.

While students were prepared to contribute in class, a lack of organisation on their part meant that I did not receive as many permission forms as I had hoped. Some students were supplied with multiple copies, but only received eight forms – not quite 30% of the class!

- Describe what was different from your usual approach.

I had previously allowed some time for discussion and reflection – for example, rather than briefly discussing the One-Child Policy during the family unit as planned, we ended up spending one whole period exploring the reasons behind it, the implications of it, the problems it has created, and how the students would feel should they be subjected to it. The reaction to this discussion was so strong that I actually had students approach me out of class time with more questions and speculations about it. (This was part of the reason why this class was chosen for the investigation – the genuine interest they showed at this time told me they could approach the reflection tasks with maturity.) The approach only changed in that I formalised the process, planning time for discussion and giving careful consideration to the types of questions I would ask.

The reflection journals were a departure from the norm, as I had never previously asked students to formally record their thoughts about their own and other cultures. I needed to provide them with guiding questions, as they had not had experience in writing personal reflections of this kind.

DATA OR INFORMATION GATHERED

- What data did you gather from the students?

I had the students discuss and write about their own cultural and linguistic identity. Students wrote written reflections based on guiding questions. I facilitated class discussions based around specific cultural or language points.

- What behaviour and language did you observe and in what ways did you record these? e.g. video, audio, your written observations, the students' written reflections on the procedure, other forms of recording

While students were very keen to express their point of view, they were not comfortable with being recorded, so written observations were made during and immediately after class discussions. Obviously, it would have been preferable to make audio recordings to have an accurate record of the discussions. However, the students' lack of comfort with the process would have inhibited the discussions that took place. Even students who do not usually participate in group discussions began making valuable contributions, or asking intelligent questions. I noted this in my chronicle and will certainly remark on the positive change in behaviour on those students' yearly reports.

Students have not yet attained the ability to use the target language for reflection, nor have they reached the point where they are able (or perhaps willing?) to reflect on their learning without guidance. While use of the target language has probably not progressed further than it would have otherwise, it seems that receptiveness to the target language and culture has improved. The all-too-familiar cry of "why do I have to learn Chinese?", was not heard during the last two months. As a teacher, not having to defend the validity and worth of your subject area is an extremely positive step!

Possibly the most positive behavioural change I observed was the openness with which the students received other students' disclosures about particular cultural points. Prior to the investigation, statements about experiences or habits were commented on in a negative way, for example "that's weird," or "that's gross." My stance, that no cultural practices are wrong or abnormal, just different, seemed to wear off on the students, and they gradually became more accepting of the differences.

- What happened when you collected/recorded data?

The process of data collection was ongoing. I found myself needing to clarify and reword questions for students, which tended to lead to sustained discussion. Again, the verbal interactions tended to be more in depth than the written reflections.

- How did you analyse the data?

While the results of the investigation cannot be measured in figures, I have been able to perceive the increased engagement and receptiveness of the group as a whole. Even those students who do not display outward enthusiasm have at least displayed less resistance to the language and cultural elements presented to them.

FINDINGS

- What did you discover?

I discovered that students were as unaware of their own unique cultural and linguistic identity as I was, but that they enjoyed the opportunity to explore it. Through the process of decentring themselves from their own cultural and linguistic experience, the students were more receptive to aspects of Chinese language and culture than prior to the investigation. They have also become more receptive to other students' experiences.

- What was evident?

It was evident that students of all ability levels and backgrounds enjoy being challenged, and are generally receptive to new ideas and information, *provided that* they can approach the ideas and information from their own perspective. Resistance to Chinese language and culture seemed to break down when I invited them to share information about and draw comparisons to their own language and culture. Allowing them to make those links, rather than simply giving the information to them without letting them build a frame of reference, made the information more accessible to them.

- Record any results of your data collection, including observations, figures, comments, questions that arose

My verbal question to the class after a written reflection on the topic of eating habits: "Do you behave the same way at every meal, or in every situation?" A number of students offered their experiences: one only eats in front of the television if Dad isn't home; some have to say grace at home, but never do around friends; one family doesn't eat together when they have guests (older people eat at a separate table to the children who wait until all the adults are served). Most students commented that guests eat first, and that they are much more polite when they eat with guests or extended family. One student commented that it's okay to eat with her hands at school but she never does at home. After this discussion, I commented that their understanding of how to behave in those different situations reflected their ability to move between cultures without thinking about it.

I asked students to note down in their reflection journals what they already knew and what they wanted to find out eating and drinking in Chinese culture. The students all wrote some variation on the theme of "Chinese people use chopsticks," but in terms of what they wanted to find out, were much more curious than I thought. Some questions that arose:

- What is the most popular food?
- Which traditional foods [do they eat]?
- Which food is [an] old recipe but [is] still eaten?
- Do they buy fast food more than they cook?
- What [do] they eat at certain times?
- I want to find out more about how they use the chopsticks and how they make their foods.

I attempted to shape the content of the unit around these areas of curiosity.

INTERPRETING THE INFORMATION

- What did you make of the findings?

I was reminded of the natural curiosity of my students, and I found myself wanting to plumb the depths of that curiosity. Through their own reflections on their cultural and linguistic profile, I discovered the sheer breadth of experience and knowledge that exists in those young people. I did not leave my native country until I was 19 years of age. By comparison, some of my 13- and 14- year-old students have lived in up to three countries and speak several different languages.

- How do these findings apply to your classroom practice/teaching and learning context?

A room full of students is an incredible cultural and linguistic resource in itself, especially in my context. By tapping into that resource, the students seemed to feel more invested in the lessons, and greater engagement and reception was possible.

In terms of classroom practice, the use of questioning, by both teacher and students, has become invaluable. Open questions and sincere answers have become an integral part of my classroom practice, and students know that there is no such thing as a “dumb question” or a “wrong answer” as far as intercultural learning goes.

- What happened that you expected to happen?

I expected (hoped) that students would become more receptive to aspects of Chinese language and culture, and they seem to have become so. I expected that they would be enthusiastic about class discussions, based on the aforementioned experience with the One-Child Policy discussion. They really did get involved in the conversations, even students who are usually very quiet and disengaged.

- What didn't happen that you expected to happen?

I expected students to be enthused about the idea of being audio taped. They were genuinely concerned about their privacy, despite my assurances that I wouldn't go broadcasting our conversations. While I could have persisted and recorded the conversations, their reluctance to be recorded would have inhibited the easy nature of our interactions.

- What happened that you didn't expect to happen?

I didn't expect that students would become more accepting of (or at least, less outwardly negative towards) other students' disclosures. The scope of the investigation was to break down prejudices against Chinese culture and language – I guess a pleasant side effect was a more mutually supportive classroom environment, in which students were more accepting of other languages and cultures generally. The unfortunate Year 8 habit of deriding everything seemed to evaporate over the course of the investigation.

- Did you find problems in your investigation design?

The main problem I encountered was an external issue – a prac student was assigned to the school without my knowledge or consent. While I explained the project to her and asked her to factor time for reflection and questioning into her lesson plans, time management issues meant that I did not have as much time to work on the project with the class as I wished. However, I was able to make some observations about the development of the students' intercultural awareness.

Other problems included the reluctance of the students to be recorded (they tended to feel their privacy was being invaded) and their lack of organisation with returning the consent forms. On reflection, I should have posted the forms directly to the parents rather than sending them home with the students, and had the Community Liaison Officer call parents who may have required interpreter assistance.

- Did you collect the data you intended?

I collected the data I intended, but due to the issues outlined above I did not collect the volume of data I had anticipated.

- What was the value of this investigation for your classroom practice in relation to intercultural language teaching and learning?

The investigation has given me confidence to throw questions to which I don't know the answers at my students. They have responded with such sincerity and maturity that I am prepared to continue to invest more time in open discussion and reflection in order to gain that depth of understanding and engagement. Especially in the junior years, where we are not bound quite so strictly to content, deadlines and outcomes as in the Preliminary and HSC courses, there is great value in allowing time for students to make those links with their own experience. It is easy for me to be enthusiastic about Chinese language and culture – it has been a lifelong passion, and I have lived experience of it. For the students, I need to allow them to develop an interest in it on their own terms and in line with their own experience, rather than me imposing it on them: “This is your target language: You WILL love it like I do!” My interest in their culture seemed to make them curious about why I am so interested in Chinese language and culture.

A pleasant side effect of my participation in this project is that my teaching of English as a Second Language has also been affected. As aforementioned, Fairfield High School is a unique learning environment, and my own personal revelation that I am a completely unique cultural and linguistic being led to the professional realisation that each student also brings that uniqueness with them. Even

teachers with a great deal more experience than I were somewhat startled by this revelation – I think we, too, are inclined to group students as “the Middle-Eastern boys,” “the African girls,” or “the Asian kids.” I shared the experience with my Year 11 ESL English class, (Chinese, Vietnamese, East Timorese, Lebanese, Iraqi, Iranian, Kenyan and Sudanese) and we have had some moments of realisation about ways in which culture affects our understanding. As an example, we were discussing lines of vector in visual texts. I made some sweeping generalisation along the lines of “Of course, our eye flows across from left to right.” The Arabic- and Persian- speaking students corrected me, “Miss, you ASSUME that our eye flows from left to right!” Their experience in another language had shaped their understanding differently to mine!

- What was your personal response to the findings?

I was touched by the sincerity and curiosity exhibited by my students. They were already intercultural beings when I began teaching them. However, my recognition of and interest in their backgrounds and interests seemed to enable them to develop a deeper awareness of their own and others’ interculturality. I was pleased that the investigation had the added benefit of toning down their derisive attitude, not just towards Chinese, but also towards each other.

MATERIALS AND EXEMPLARS

- What you produced and what your students produced

See Attachment 1 – My Cultural and Linguistic Profile

I have included this as it not only caused the students to reflect on their cultural and linguistic identity, but it gave me a good profile of the group, showing their breadth of experience.

See Attachment 2 – Eating and Drinking guided reflection

This was given to the class at the beginning of the unit on Eating and Drinking. It oriented them to the unit, and also provided me with information about their areas of interest.

Student responses – unfortunately, while all students in the class completed the above activities, I was limited in those I could use by the small number of consent forms that were returned.

- Notations of the things that worked and those that did not

The class discussions worked much better than the written reflections. Students seem to feel that time spent talking is time not spent writing, and that writing is too much like hard work! The depth of the written responses varied from student to student, as writing ability and motivation allowed. With a mixed ability class such as this, it really would have worked much better if I had been able to record our class discussions and individual interactions for the purposes of providing meaningful data for this report.

EVALUATION

- How well do you feel the investigation went?

I feel the investigation went quite well. While I was not able to collect as much data as I had hoped, my original question has certainly been answered. “Can the perception of Chinese language and culture as ‘alien’ be broken down through a process of reflection?” I believe that it can. However, I don’t know that I would have achieved the same results with my other, less mature Year 8 class. The respect this group showed for the process of discussion and reflection was heartening.

- Was it valuable for you? Why/Why not?

This process was extremely valuable and it will continue to inform my classroom practice. The mutually supportive environment that we fostered through the “no dumb questions/no wrong answers” approach enabled students to communicate effectively with me and with each other.

- Was it valuable for your students? Why/Why not?

Again, students really benefited from the mutually supportive learning environment. I think they learned as much about themselves and each other as they did about Chinese language and culture. While they may be too young to realise it, the social lessons that they take from this project will further enable them

to function as intercultural communicators in an increasingly globalised environment.

- How could I modify or further develop the investigation?

It would be ideal to begin this exercise at the start of the course, to give students the language of reflection and to get them into a regular habit of reflecting on their own learning. Introducing the concept part way through the year was a bit disorienting for them, and I feel the limited time given to the project (i.e. not giving them a great deal of time to develop the metalanguage of reflection) meant that their statements were not as in-depth as they might otherwise have been. I will continue to work on this with the students over the rest of the course, as I feel it is beneficial to them, not only in terms of their language learning, but in the greater context of their education as a whole and their own personal development.

I always begin the year with a “What I know/What I want to find out” activity about Chinese language and culture. It tends to be brain stormed onto art paper and displayed in the classroom for the first term, and is inclined towards generalisations and stereotypes. In future, I will have them write it in their reflection journals, and at the end of the year (without looking back) have them answer the same questions. It will be an interesting exercise to see if the stereotypes have been challenged, if they have gained insight into the Chinese culture and language, and if the depth of what they wish to find out has changed.

- Where to next? How can you incorporate what you have learned/move to a new investigation?

From here I feel I can move into the programming aspect of intercultural language teaching and learning. I intend to incorporate intercultural elements into the Year 8 Chinese Program, and through faculty training and development, encourage other members of staff to incorporate these elements into their own language programs. I will continue to encourage public discussion and private reflection in the classroom, as I have witnessed the value these practices offer both group dynamics and personal development.

REFLECTION

- Provide a personal response to the investigation, the process of investigation, and the outcomes for you

This investigation has provided me with the opportunity to reflect upon my own teaching practices, and the value of experience the students bring to the classroom. In terms of students as resources, I had only considered my one background speaker as a valuable resource in the language classroom. I now understand that each student brings his or her own experience as an intercultural language user to the classroom, and especially in a context as multicultural as our school, this can act as a foundation on which to build deeper understanding.

In a school environment, a planned investigative process can be so easily derailed. While I could not proceed with the investigation as initially planned, the activities with which I was able to proceed yielded pleasing results.

The main outcome of this investigation has been the creation of a more positive, mutually supportive learning environment in my language classroom. I found that allowing students to explore a subject from their own perspective, leads to greater engagement and a much more positive response.

Where were you born?

In how many countries have you lived?

What countries were they?

How many languages do you speak?

What are they?

How do you use those languages?

What cultural group do you most feel a part of?

Do you think you are culturally different to your friends? Why? Why not?

Do you think you are culturally different to your family? Why? Why not?

How do you describe yourself?

Attachment 2

Eating and Drinking

1. What do you know about eating and drinking in Chinese culture?
2. What customs do you follow when you eat and drink? (e.g., do you say grace? use chopsticks? eat at a table?)
3. What do you want to find out about eating and drinking in Chinese culture?