

ILTLP CLASSROOM-BASED INVESTIGATION REPORT

TEACHER'S NAME	SCHOOL	LANGUAGE	YEAR LEVEL
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CONTEXT OF INVESTIGATION

I teach at Shenton College in Perth WA. The College has a Middle School for Year 8/9s and a separate Senior School for year 10 to 12s but the school is on the same campus. There are 1270 students in the school. The school is situated in a high socio-economic area with good parental support. Students in year 8/9 must study a language, either French or Japanese for two 50 minute periods a week. Then in late July, year 9 students make decisions as to whether they will continue their language in Year 10. This means the class that I chose to conduct the research with, contained some students who would be continuing French in Year 10 and others who wouldn't. Their motivation level naturally differed according to the value they had put on learning French. Ability level in this class was very diverse as well.

I chose a year 9 class of 32 students including several academic talent students. I have taught this class from year 8 and know many of the students through their friendships with my son and through other activities (soccer/debating, etc). There are many students who "think outside of the square" and it's a noisy, vibrant class with students who have many opinions to offer! Some of the students have done French from Year 3, some started in Year 6 or 8, a couple are new to French this year. Their prior learning is therefore very varied and my teaching tries to encourage students to work at their own level within whatever framework we are exploring at the time.

AREA OF INVESTIGATION

I chose this area of investigation because I wanted to learn how to explore a text in greater depth looking at not only what the cultural differences are but suggestions as to why there are these differences. I purposefully created a text that was part of the teaching learning programme for my Yr 9s. One of their tasks that term was to design a booklet to give to Primary School students with pictures and French writing about their typical day/daily routine.

The aspect of intercultural language and learning that I wanted to look at was noticing and comparing and probing the students to explore their own attitudes, opinions, values and dispositions towards their daily routine by making comparisons with the snapshot of a day in the life of a French year 9 boy. I wanted to also explore how I understood learning in intercultural Language learning and how I could improve my teaching to encourage further learning in this area.

I did not make many changes to my normal classes apart from having to explain to the students about the project and how I would appreciate their input. Students had already seen DVDs of French families/school day in both France and Réunion Island, which I had taken this year or a couple of year's ago. These DVD clips showed teenagers at school, in class, at the canteen or at home eating breakfast or dinner or just being teenagers! I used experiences from the DVD's to write the text so that it reflected real life for a French teenager. We had covered a lot of vocabulary and language on the area of daily routine and interests, eg reflexive verbs, adverbs such as usually, sometimes, time, etc.

CLASSROOM PRACTICE

For several weeks before carrying out this research I had explored the area of daily routine through DVDs, texts, photos with the class. I wrote a text in French about a typical day in the school year for a Year 9 French boy, called Lucien. I asked a French colleague to check the text for authenticity, as the text was full of intercultural references. The text reflected contemporary living culture as it was based on what the students had seen, especially in the up to date DVDs, even though it was not an authentic text. I purposefully made it rich in cultural references to facilitate students' reflections on what I hoped would be sophisticated understandings. I hoped some cultural values would jump out at the students from the language in the text.

I presented the investigation in two stages. I used the text as part of my normal teaching/learning programme and as an assessment tool. Students were asked to translate the text into English as an assessment, because we had been doing a lot of work on daily routine and this was one way of checking on what language/grammar concepts the students had learnt.

Then, after the first task had been completed and verified, I gave students the text back again. This time, I introduced the second task as it was written on the bottom of the sheet:

"This text describes a typical day for Lucien at his school in Lyon. In studying the text, what cultural differences can be found between your typical day and what Lucien does? Describe the differences in detail giving suggestions as to why you think Lucien may spend the day as he does."

Questions that I used to provide scaffolding included:

What factors influence your own daily routine (e.g. sport commitments)?

What factors do you think influence Lucien's daily routine?

Why do you think Lucien does some of the things he does, e.g. drinks hot chocolate for breakfast out of a bowl?

Why do you do some of the things you do, e.g. have 35 minutes for lunch?

To clarify the task and to set the scene, I asked students why they thought the Australian BBQ was a tradition in Australia and a big part of our culture. This led to an animated discussion in English, with all sorts of reasons being put forward.

I used scaffolding questions in response to the students' comments such as:

What is a tradition?

Why is the Aussie BBQ a tradition?

What reasons do you think there are for the Aussie BBQ being a big part of our culture?

Who "invented" the Aussie BBQ?

Students were then asked to consider reasons as to why ways of doing things became a tradition and part of the culture of that country or people in relation to the text. Students could work in groups of three or four to discuss, then write down intercultural differences they noticed, along with suggestions as to why this might be so. This was a change for me, usually we would discuss an intercultural difference without necessarily understanding or reflecting upon why it might occur. It was data from the interaction and comparisons that I wanted to record. I was also interested in the diverse perspectives and to see how students took into account others perspectives and the values they placed upon their own lives in exploring a different culture.

I had made the active decision to carry out this activity in English because I wanted a free flowing discussion and a depth of understanding from the students about their own language and culture in comparison with the French. I wanted students to reflect on their own culture. This did mean that we spent more class time speaking English than we normally would do, but I felt it would provide some long term benefits for the

students and for me. I realised that asking students why they thought their daily routine was constructed in the way it was, in comparison to Lucien's made an enormous difference to the output of learning. It was such a simple strategy!

The class reacted very positively to the "why" question and some of the discussion was thought provoking. I was surprised at the depth of their thoughts, especially in the initial discussion about the Aussie BBQ. The "why" question gave the students direct applicability to their own world and in comparing the text, students could connect Lucien's life with their own world.

After the discussion, students were then asked to design their booklets about a typical school day and their daily routine. However, this year, I asked students to emphasise the cultural differences between them selves and Lucien and to demonstrate this through their French. Students then designed and produced a written booklet about their own daily routine. My aim was to see if there was a noticeable difference between the booklets from last year and the new ones in relation to students' demonstration of understanding of intercultural differences.

DATA OR INFORMATION GATHERED

I used some booklets from last year as a guide to demonstrate what students had produced and as a reference for me to see if this year's discussions and reflections on intercultural differences made a difference how the booklets were written. Last year's booklets were a starting point for my data collection.

Then I collected students' observations and ideas which they had written in dot points on paper after discussion in groups of three or four. I also observed what was happening in the groups and made some written reflections on the procedure. I did not record orally any of the conversations as in the class set up with 32 students it would have been too noisy.

I gave the class 45 minutes which was basically a whole lesson to discuss and record their ideas. During the discussion I noted some interesting questions being asked by students amongst themselves such as:

"What do you do in your house"? or

"Why do you think Lucien uses a bowl for drinking his hot chocolate?"

I overheard one group talking about schooling in France, especially the Saturday lessons. At this point, I intervened and reminded the class that although this was wonderful that they were bringing in other intercultural differences that they knew about but, for the purposes of this research, I wanted them to only use information provided in the text.

Another group posed the question:

"What is typical?"

This we took up as a class and discussed what typical could mean for us and in the text. This varied of course depending on each individual's background, however, students were able to agree to what a typical day in their school might look like, with the main variations being on the type of food eaten and the values they placed on activities such as sport or music. They also were able to acknowledge that what a typical or normal experience for them was quite different for another.

FINDINGS

I discovered that students had a wealth of information to bring to this task and they enjoyed the reflection upon their own culture. As students warmed to the task they offered more and more reasons for some of the things they did which previously they had never thought about. Also, I was delighted with some of the questions that students asked when designing their booklets which demonstrated that they were indeed reflecting upon their own culture and trying to show this in their work.

Answers to the question: “Why do we have the Australian BBQ?” included the following?

“meat is cheap and easy to get”

“the Aboriginals started the tradition with their open fires and meat they had killed”

“our climate is made for outdoor living”

“Aussie men are lazy!”

“we didn’t have any spices, so we ate lots of meat instead”

“in the old days and still today getting meat for free was easy – there are lots of kangaroos”

Some of the initial responses were as follows:

“because that’s what we do”

“it’s traditional”

“never really thought about it”

It was evident that in some of the initial responses to the Aussie BBQ some students had never really reflected on why they do the things they do. This activity had helped them to reflect about themselves as people and in consequence, gave them the noticing and probing skills to help form understandings of another culture.

Responses to the French text included the following:

“Students wear free dress because the government allow them to”

Lucien gets up early because school starts early, at 8.00am. This must be to allow for the two hour lunch break.”

Lucien learns two foreign languages – Spanish and English; I think because he is in France which is surrounded by countries with different languages so he has more need than we do”

“Lucien has a big lunch, more like our dinner in school which includes entrée, main and dessert. He gets two hours to eat this. I think the food is free or cheap and the government must put a lot more money into schools than ours does. Maybe education is more important to the French?”

“French people wake up early at 6.30am and go to school at 8 o’clock and finish at 4.00pm. The reason why they have a longer day is because their lunch and recess are really long because of the food in France. Food is really important to them, more than a lot of things. That is what France is known for – the food and the way it’s eaten.”

“The cultural differences between the French and English we thought were somewhat minor but when we looked into the differences in culture they were quite important.”

“We think it’s rude to drink from a bowl and dunk our bread, that’s why we use cups or mugs”

“They actually spend 2 hours on homework every night while we (or me) don’t spend hardly any time on it.”

“They have a two hour lunch because of the climate and Mexican, Spanish customs – (siesta)”

“They write in twenty four hour time because the whole of Europe writes that way and it makes it easier to read timetables”

“They have a 3 course meal at the canteen because it’s their main meal of the day.”

Questions asked during the booklet design included:

“How do I say in French outdoors? I want to show that we are an outdoor nation.”

“The sun is important to our lives, how do I say: ‘I get up with the sun and go jogging’?”

“Sport is important to us and we revere our sporting heroes. How do I show that in my booklet?”

INTERPRETING THE INFORMATION

What I learnt from the findings was that my students were really interested in this type of activity and engaged whole heartedly in discussing both what the cultural differences are and giving suggestions as to why this might be.

These findings have made me more aware of taking the time to look at cultural differences in more depth and encouraging the students to question and think about their learning, attitudes and values.

What happened that I expected to happen was that the more industrious students would focus on the activity and in the process, explore their own values and culture. However, I didn't expect all students to embrace the activity in quite such depth. There were a few students who pointed out the cultural differences without giving reasons as to why and this may have been because they needed more time to think things through.

The data below, from one particular students' group dot points surprised me because one of them is in the academic talent programme where analytical thinking is the norm and I felt she had not really understood the complexity of the task,:

- Starts school earlier at 8.00.
 - They have free dress.
- Drinks hot chocolate out of a bowl.
 - Longer school hours.
 - Go home for lunch.
 - Goes to bed at 10.30.
 - Learn Spanish.
- Lunchtime lasts for two hours.
- Go to school on Sunday, but only until 12 O'clock (This was not in the text, nor is it correct. Students do attend school on Saturday mornings but not Sundays!).
 - They wear free dress because the government doesn't enforce uniforms.
 - Play handball.
 - Opposite seasons

This data demonstrated that the students in this group had understood the differences very clearly, but they had not made any suggestions apart from the free dress, as to why there are these cultural differences. I felt they had not reflected upon their own values and culture.

I asked this group about their findings and the reason they had not analysed their data was simply that they hadn't listened or read the task properly and didn't realise what they were being asked to do!!!

I did collect the data that I intended but I feel that I should have given more time to the activity and not just one lesson. The difficulty is that with big classes, the concentration span is not necessarily high for focussing on the same activity over a long period of time and I wonder if I had allowed more time whether in fact the students would have given richer data.

The value for me of this investigation for my classroom practice in relation to intercultural language learning and teaching has been to demonstrate that it is important to take more time to allow students to reflect on cultural aspects of both their lives and the lives of people in the language that they are studying. It is important because in encouraging students to question and probe values, cultures and traditions, I believe students develop a better understanding of not only them selves but others both within their community and then elsewhere.

MATERIALS AND EXEMPLARS

I have included some of the dot points recorded from students about the intercultural differences between Lucien's day and their own, above. I also collected the full responses of the students, many of which demonstrate their intercultural understandings. (Editorial note: the stimulus text and examples of student work have not been included with the report for online presentation. We suggest you contact the author if you wish to discuss these with her.)

One of the main differences that I did notice from last year's work to this was the amount that students wrote in French. This was an unforeseen outcome and I can only guess at the reason. I wondered if it might be because students were reflecting more on their own culture and therefore wanting to include extra information. The booklets presented to me this year were definitely of a superior quality than last year's, so perhaps an assumption could be made, that by focussing on the intercultural learning, the language learning also improves. This is an area that I am sure I will explore again in the classroom, with my focus question being: Does the exploration of intercultural learning improve language learning outcomes?

I felt the limitation in language did hamper some of the students' exploration of intercultural language learning, although again I was surprised at the effort made to try to demonstrate their values and culture through their writing.

EVALUATION

I was pleased with the results. My students participated in rich discussion and seemed to enjoy the opportunity to analyse the text in relation to intercultural differences. I found that I was analysing my teaching more and observing more in the classroom which led to me reflecting upon what I needed to do to help individual students.

It was valuable for me as I have learnt that the students are more than capable of working out with a high degree of accuracy why people within a culture might act as they do.

I believe the analysis of the text in exploring the intercultural element of learning was valuable for my students, as it gave them the opportunity to reflect upon their own values and really understand a different point of view. I hope this sort of activity will help students in their relationships with others in life, to try to understand the person who thinks or acts in different ways, realising that there are many reasons as to why this person may think the way they do.

In future I will ensure that I my learning and teaching programme harnesses and nurtures the diversity of students, as this small classroom research has demonstrated to me that students who understand their own culture and who can reflect upon their own lives are more capable of understanding another culture.

I would like to extend this research to a range of text types, working with students to assist them in learning about diverse cultures through their language studies. I learnt that the questions asked were very important in encouraging students to reflect and quite simply, asking "why" or "how" was all that was needed to take the learning to a higher level.

I am particularly interested in looking at the focus question previously mentioned:

Does the exploration of intercultural learning improve language learning outcomes?

Because my small research gave me an unexpected outcome that by making the intercultural learning the focus, the written French produced was of much more detail than the previous year, whereby my focus had been on language outcomes.

REFLECTION

I enjoyed having the opportunity to participate in this study although for me the timing was difficult as I had an operation that needed recovery time and also I was away for a month from school in a French exchange programme. This was why I decided to organise my research around a class activity that I usually carried out and to keep the focus small. However, the process has made me reflect upon my own teaching and I feel that as a result of this investigation, in future I will give my students more in depth opportunities to reflect upon both their own culture as well as another country's.

My only concern is the amount of English that the class and I used in doing this task. I only see the students for one hundred minutes each week and often lose some of that time to extra curricular activities. I believe though, the benefits outweigh the disadvantages and I feel, that as students improve in their language I would work towards having the discussions in French. Although the booklets were not necessarily as rich in intercultural learning as I had hoped, the discussion and effort from many of the students to attempt to bring in this element into their writing was very pleasing.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this informative and educative professional development. I have really enjoyed the experience.

Jenny Spearman

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