Australian Government

Quality Teacher
Programme

ILTLP Intercultural Language
Teaching and Learning
in Practice

ILTLP CLASSROOM-BASED INVESTIGATION REPORT

TEACHER'S NAME	SCHOOL	LANGUAGE	YEAR LEVEL
Michelle Bacash	Mona Vale Public School	Italian	Stage 3

CONTEXT

I have undertaken this investigation with the Year 6 Opportunity Class at Mona Vale Public School on the Northern Beaches. This is my second year with the class and their classroom teacher. I began the pilot LOTE Italian program at the school in 2006 with the Year 5 & 6 OCs. Italian is the only language taught at the school and was introduced with the support of the then principal, a team of teachers and a committee of interested parents. There is one background speaker of Italian, 7 Asian language background speakers, one Hebrew background speaker and the remaining 21 of Anglo Celtic heritage.

Italian language is taught in 40-minute blocks for two hours a week.

AREA OF INVESTIGATION

(what you planned)

The overarching question is:
"If you begin to free yourself from the limitation of a one-culture perspective, what might happen to you? Truths might be revealed to you…"
P.95 *Waldorf Education – A Family Guide*, edited by Pamela Johnson Fenner and Karen L. Rivers, Michaelmas Press

I located my teaching and planning in addressing the following areas:

▪ Analysing the various ways in which students experience going to the beach

▪ Exploring commonality and difference in a collective experience

▪ Finding out about the intercultural and the intracultural experiences of going to the beach

▪ Having students investigate, compare and contrast their experiences in Australia with their acquired knowledge of Italian beach culture.

I chose to investigate this area because I work on the Northern Beaches (and Bondi) where going to the beach is a big part of the communal/collective culture. I wanted to tap into an area that was easy for the students to relate to, that has a big impact on their way of life and their leisure time and that would provide an obvious counterpoint with what the Italian experience is broadly speaking.

The intercultural language and learning was integrated not by presetting the content but providing a context. The context was their individual experience of going to the beach in response to the prompt – **Per me la spiaggia è***…. (For me the beach is…). The content that followed, in terms of language and concepts, allowed for individual differences, collective sharing and comparing. With this foundation students could begin to analyse their reality and compare it with that of their peers and what their own investigations led them to understand of Italian beachgoers in conjunction with teacher input and classroom discussions.

My planning model changed from creating a very structured unit of work with all the specific language models and learning activities to a teacher facilitated model. I navigated with students and was guided by their choices in determining what language content and structures to introduce as well as how best this could be expressed in a series of individual products along the way and a final group product.

CLASSROOM PRACTICE

When I first mentioned that we would explore beach culture as it is lived by them in Sydney, students were very excited and curious. 'What was Maestra Bacash up to this time?' It is not an area I have previously explored in my teaching of language and culture and yet I could see how relevant it was to their everyday lives. Mona Vale School is a ten-minute walk to the local beach. I can see their local beach from the classroom.

The entry point into this investigation began with brainstorming and mind mapping in response to the statement – ***Per me la spiaggia è****….* (For me the beach is…) Students were firstly required to create a personal mind map. This map was their point of reference throughout the investigation to which they could add ideas at any time and refer back to – in a *before* and *after* process. Students were then asked to contribute one key word to describe their predominant experience. Each response was recorded in a communal mind map as part of a journal entitled ***Alla Spiaggia*** (At the beach). Students engaged actively in the process. A feeling of ownership was evident from the way they all responded in a very personal and proud way.

In the past I would have created my own mind map in my own time to stimulate ideas and focus areas. Reading background material has also gone hand in hand with this process and usually involves immersing myself in an autobiographical account, pertinent to the subject area, of someone living in / visiting Italy. In this instance, although I did background reading and study, I left the mind mapping up to the students. They created the content for the investigation. I tried not to be too intrusive when shaping how the content would be documented but I did try to help them crystallise the main ideas so that the information was contained in a meaningful context. Personal mind maps help students to think about and record their own experiences and feelings and help prepare them for contributing to the group discussion and exploration of the area of investigation. Whole class mind maps broaden the individual perspective and allow ideas to be shared and discussed.

I initiated and structured the tasks. The students were responsible initially for providing the content that led to using the target language (Italian) in context. The teaching processes were informed by how the students responded to the tasks. I monitored how engaged the students were and expanded and contracted the tasks as and when necessary. In this way I was more responsive to the mood of the students, their interest levels and their focus areas.

I have always written meticulously detailed programs and implemented them the way they are written. I've done this for many reasons: because it has been a school requirement to submit programs for evaluation, because it has given me a direction and a solid plan of action, it's safe and has helped me cope with teaching a range of classes and ability levels from K - 6 at several schools. The big drawback with this approach is that it stifles creativity in myself and in the students. In recent years I have taken a very different approach, one that acknowledges my need to express who I am in my teaching and also allows the children to actively contribute to the creative direction of the language classroom. I used to teach the way I was taught. I have found that children today don't respond to really prescriptive and overly defined ways of learning. That isn't to say they don't need clear boundaries and facilitation! What they learn has to relate back in some way to who they are as cultural beings and their developmental stage. The way to make the learning of another language relevant is to give it a culture. When what I do is successful in the classroom it usually involves providing learning experiences that engage their thinking, their feeling life and their will in a meaningful way to them.

DATA OR INFORMATION GATHERED

(what happened)

The students were responsible for maintaining a journal entitled **Alla Spiaggia** (At the beach). The journal consisted of a:

- **Vocabulary word bank** (to facilitate *Making linguistic Connections*), generated from the communal mind mapping process, for target language acquisition and development

This word bank was generated from student responses in English to the question **Per me la spiaggia è*….* (For me the beach is…). I translated the responses into the TL and presented them as a vocabulary set. I then asked the children to match the words and to think about and identify what linguistic connections they had made and how they had made them.

We identified a set of strategies that included the use of previous knowledge, word association techniques, sound association, following a thought process, use of elimination, random selection and risk taking. Not all words had a TL equivalent e.g. boarding or surfing, therefore students could see how English words have entered the TL. All these strategies helped students to manage a task I would normally have circumvented to a large degree by providing the correct response in a bilingual word list. The students were inspired by the opportunity to manage their own learning and recognised the hidden or implicit knowledge they already have and can draw on to facilitate their TL language development.

- **Bilingual mind map**

The final step in the mind mapping process. It crystallised the significant areas of personal interest associated with going to the beach.

- **TL matching exercise**

Matching TL words with pictures typically associated with beach paraphernalia and activities

- **Tocca a Te** (It's Your Turn)

La mia esperienza personale - Students participated in classroom discussions, sharing and debating their personal/ family experiences of going to the beach. This was followed up with a journal entry designed to answer specific questions aimed at helping them to reflect upon the discussions and learning activities.

What did we analyse today? (4 line answer)
Is your experience like the majority of children in this class? Yes/No
How? (a short paragraph)

The process of revision and analysis worked towards building knowledge, developing high order thinking skills, encouraging independent learning and personal responsibility, and raising awareness.

- **Spiagge Australiane /Spiagge Italiane** document – *Moving Between Cultures*

The intercultural and intra-cultural experience of going to the beach was examined here. Each student presented two PowerPoint slides to the class, one depicting an Italian beach/scene and the other an Australian beach/scene, from their own internet research. This activity provided students with the visual material to analyse and contrast Italian and Australian beaches as well as the opportunity to explore an area of the investigation previously unknown to them. They were then invited to share and discuss their work with other class members and to consider the following questions whilst doing so:

What do you see?

What's happening?

Can you notice any differences between the Australian and the Italian beaches?

How do you think this affects what happens at the beach?

This data from this was recorded under the headings **Spiagge Australiane /Spiagge Italiane**.

- **Tocca a Te** (It's Your Turn)

Students once again recorded their observations in their journal by responding to the following questions:

What did we analyse today?

Indicate below any differences you discovered between Australian and Italian beaches.

How do you think this affects what happens at the beach?

What has really struck you about these two types of beach scenes?

How does this change how you feel about going to the beach in Australia?

In answering these questions students really needed to delve into the possible reasons behind the different cultural experiences on Italian and Australian beaches and to explain their reactions to these differences.

- **L'alfabeto dell'estate**

A beach themed rhyming alphabet rebus from an Italian holiday text was recorded in their workbooks for language development. The Alphabet exercise put the language of the beach into a poetic and pictorial context. It provoked comment about rhyme and rhythm in the Italian language. This exercise allowed for topic specific use of the language and further built the vocabulary and information resources for their Big Book project. By enunciating each individual letter students were compelled to think about the spelling of words. This exercise helped to introduce the Italian alphabet in a context relevant to the investigation.

- **The Big Book Project**

The Big Book was a practical and enjoyable way of drawing together all the threads of the investigation. Students had enough of a foundation to launch into an area of interest based on what they had been observing, investigating, analysing and studying about Italian and Australian beach cultures. There were passionate declarations about which topic they would pursue and a sense of ownership of their big book page. Students worked in pairs. Equal space was devoted to Italian beaches and beach culture and Australian beaches and beach culture. The diverse range of topics that they volunteered included creating a book cover to accurately reflect the cultural icons of both countries; a contents page, body boarding in Australia, surfing and beach sports in Australia and Italy, beach food in both countries, lifeguards in both countries, marine life in Australia and Italy, private beaches in Italy, public beaches in Australia, beach buildings and topography.

The Big Book was written exclusively in Italian to get them to experiment with applying the language we had been using and to see how well they could manage the concepts that underpin the cultural differences that make up the beach experience in Australia and Italy.

The visual aspect of the project also had to be consistent with the reality/truth of what they had observed throughout the investigation and not just a set of pretty pictures to look at.

What happened - My observations of the process

These students always love to show what they can achieve in their own right. Their enthusiasm for the big book project was obvious and they leapt into the task brimming with ideas having absorbed the main themes and language. However I have noticed a tendency to want to use more complex language and language structures than the scope of the unit and their experience and exposure allowed. The predominant strategy they used when they could not match the TL to what they wanted to express was to go online and use the translator. This meant that in the extensive editing process I had to help them to simplify what they wanted to write to reflect their true language level so that they would practise applying the learnt structures.

This dilemma raised the problem of how to productively curb the obvious enthusiasm that the investigation had inspired in them with the reality of the limitations of their skills in the TL. There was a mismatch between their increasing understanding of the cultural concepts and the limitations of the TL language needed to convey this. The TL structures were basic but they were appropriate and adequate for the task.

In general I avoid the use of worksheets to practise language structures and grammar. I start with a context, explore and create the content with the students, do a lot of oral work and repetition and then help the children to use what they have acquired by applying it in a context that is meaningful for them. Usually this involves drawing/painting a picture/scene and using the language to accompany it. The visual prompts help them to assimilate the language in a meaningful way. However in Stage 3 I now believe that some straight grammar lessons at critical times in the development of the unit of work are necessary to give the students a working knowledge and practical grasp of the language structures required for completing their own work.

FINDINGS

In terms of the learning activities and experiences I observed the following:

Individual students managed their PowerPoint presentations easily. Each set of slides was analysed and discussed. This activity generated a lot of discussion and therefore took several lessons to complete. Nevertheless it did achieve the aim of analysing and contrasting Italian and Australian beaches helping students to build a picture that they did not have before and to begin to form opinions about what they saw.

The time it took to manage getting through all the presentations presented some problems. Repetition of themes led to students being distracted and impatient. Those who had already presented were less interested in the presentations of those students who had yet to present and were eager to do so. Nevertheless a positive outcome was that everyone completed the work and as we progressed through the remaining presentations I asked the whole class to contribute to modifying the slides to incorporate the target language. In doing so, students began to apply the linguistic structures and vocabulary previously learnt and to refocus their attention back on the task.

One girl used her allotted time to give a presentation about a famous Italian surfer, which was informative and unusual. It showed lateral thinking. This was in addition to the set PowerPoint.

The limitations of any PowerPoint presentation lie in what is left out and when we looked behind the presentations we began to ask questions that helped the analysis process. As a result students' perceptions of what they saw were challenged and this helped them to delve into, in a limited yet not insignificant way, Italian beach culture and their assumptions about Australian beach culture. For example, in Australia people wear protective sun wear, yet no presentation specifically addressed this or showed sun block being applied. Nor were UV sun tents in view. Yet, from experience, we do know that they are used extensively. Beach umbrellas, whilst intrinsic to the Italian experience, paid for as part of the use of private resort facilities, are not as numerous in Australia where beaches are long and can get windy making umbrellas fly away and become dangerous. They are not anchored in the sand in the same way as the *ombrelloni* are on private Italian beaches where clients are not encumbered with transporting them to the beach. Also beach umbrellas pre-date the crisis that the hole in the ozone layer prompted and the subsequent sun smart strategies (from which these students benefit), which have become part of the Australian way of life by necessity.

In terms of their journal entries, the use of the word 'analyse' created some confusion and needed explanation. The mind mapping and vocabulary building were not part of the analysis but were thought to be so. Students needed clarification that they were analysing their experiences and not the individual tasks.

Only a couple of students had had first hand experience of being on an Italian beach. The very obvious differences in the physical appearance between the two countries' beaches, and the private (Italian) versus the public (Australian) beaches provoked prejudices that led most students to emphatically declare that their Australian experience was superior to the Italian's beach experience.

Discussion of the slides also threw up questions like: *How come there aren't any waves? Why don't they wear board shorts? How come so few people are swimming in the water? How come there is only one lifeguard? Where are the flags? What's that in the water?* (Referring to the huge rocks in the sea) *Why are there so many private beaches in Italy*? (Outrageous!)

Students' comments

One boy observed that the private Italian beaches actually offered everything required for a safe and enjoyable experience e.g. the hire of all equipment, whereas on Australian beaches one's own health, fun and safety have to be personally managed (with the exception of the presence of lifesavers).

Naomi: *"People in Italy seem to be much more sun smart than us,that was a bit shocking."*

Daniel – *"It has really struck me how lively and populated Australian beaches are compared to Italian beaches and how lucky we are to live in Australia, I find it really strange that there are waveless and private beaches in Italy. Also there are bars on the Italian beach."*

Lucia – *"The Italians have less fun because they can't surf, jump waves, or even build sandcastles plus they don't get much space and they have to pay for their beach experience."*

Joy – *"The Australian beaches just look more appealing."*

Melody – *"It struck me that two beaches could be so totally different, and that Italian beaches had private sections. I thought this was unfair."*

Amelia – *"I have found that even through Sydney has a very high skin cancer risk, we don't use umbrellas as much and we don't put on as much sunscreen. I think this is surprising."*

Bronte – *"The buildings around Australian beaches tend to be a lot more modern…"*

Sharni – *"Italian beaches look dull, stony, and grey. Whereas Australian beaches look bright, warm, soft, and inviting."*

Michael – *"…most Australians are used to sand and big surf but when you go to Italy, all you see is pebbles/rocks and ripples with 5 lines of umbrellas (ombrellone) stretching all the way down the beach."*

Daniele – *"What really, really struck me is the difference… in the texture of the sand."*

What happened - My observations of the behaviour

Because I am pursuing the investigation with an OC class in Year 6 I have come up against some of the usual Year 6 issues such as the laid back / slack attitude of students towards completing work thoroughly and on time. During the 4th week of the investigation I invested a good 20 minutes "lecturing" the class on learning good habits and having regard for the process of learning another language and its culture. I had started to notice that a significant number of students were seeing Italian as an easy option and not committing to the tasks in a dedicated way.

My lecturing had the desired effect and managed to break an invisible barrier by provoking them to reach a new level in their perception of what was required of them. I encouraged them to be more independent learners and to pursue their interests about Italian culture beyond the classroom rather than relying on what I could offer them. This challenge required deeper thinking from them about ways to engage more fully in the investigation. As a result, at the next lesson a handful of students presented me with projects that they had pursued in the intervening day. Also, most children had completed all of the requirements for their journal.

I was also provoked into modifying my approach and putting more thought into tailoring the investigation to suit individual needs, as well as class needs, so that I would not lose their interest and to acknowledge where improvements could be made and to implement them. As a direct result of this reflection, I decided to engage two students in the process of consolidating all of the PowerPoint presentations into one class document. This consolidation of material provided a visual journal of all student work and an ongoing point of reference for the investigation and its development. One of these boys had, through his behaviour, shown the need for a different / greater challenge than hitherto allowed and so pursued his way of achieving this task.

Also, other students subsequently came forward with personal projects on Totti – the famous Italian soccer player; Italian tennis stars; Italian music performances. One boy wanted to play a bagpipe tune after he learnt the Italian Abbruzzi origins of the bagpipes.

I learnt that if I do less they do more.

INTERPRETING THE INFORMATION

I gathered data in a number of ways. The students kept a journal and I was busily tracking and recording my observations in my own journal, entering data every time I saw the class for their Italian lessons. My observations took into account the practical aspects of getting the investigation up and running as well as a constant analysis of what I saw, heard and felt going on in the classroom. My intention was to primarily gather data through exploration then observation and reflection and to use this to inform the ongoing direction of the investigation. Collecting, recording and analysing the data was the key to constructing a meaningful and dynamic relationship with the students that in turn informed my decisions about how to progress the investigation in a mutually beneficial way.

The purposeful vocation of language teaching in the primary classroom is so often whitewashed and sabotaged by its non-compulsory status and its inclusion as part of HSIE*. This investigation helped me to give due consideration to the affective relationship between the students and myself and how their interrelationships help them to achieve collective as well as personal goals related to the learning activities. Participation in the investigation has empowered me to have regard for who I am as an intercultural being and how this informs what kind of teacher I am and am becoming, and also how this impacts in subtle and profound ways on the students and their experience of learning a foreign language.

I expected that students would be enthusiastic about the area of the investigation that I chose and they were because they are a very open group of people. Also I believe that they have become used to the way I explore topics laterally allowing room for experimentation.

I didn't expect to be confronted by students who, in writing their big book entry, bypassed the target language structures and vocabulary they had been exposed to, instead using a web translation. Having said this, it is not the first time they have used online resources with a cut and paste mentality. I believe it is a symptom of the internet generation – why write it if it is easier and quicker to get it off the web? If the set tasks haven't been completed on time, use the web to do the work. This approach is like covering a hole in the ground with a handkerchief; it disguises the problem but sooner or later reveals a flawed understanding of the actual process of learning a second language. It also reveals a lack of understanding of how the TL works syntactically because web-based translators are notoriously inaccurate and only provide literal translations. It has been important to get them to first, acknowledge the shortcomings in this approach and secondly, to change their habits to reflect this.

Students didn't embrace the Italian beach culture at all. They are so rooted in the Australian experience that they can't really place themselves on an Italian beach. It is too foreign and different for them. During the investigation they were dutiful and keen observers of both cultural experiences but their authentic exposure to what Australia offers prejudiced them towards it and away from Italy. Even those who had experienced Italian beach culture still favoured Australian beach life.

The design of the investigation was workable and achievable. In future I believe it would be valuable to work with small groups to identify gaps in student's ability to use the TL accurately and effectively to best serve the purpose and nature of their projects.

The use of the student journal with questions designed specifically to solicit information that addressed the main focus areas of the investigation, and my teacher's journal, meant that I collected the data I intended to.

The value of this investigation for my classroom practice in relation to intercultural language teaching and learning is the new direction it provides. My approach to this investigation and how I implemented it in the classroom was not radically different to what I already do. If anything the investigation has given me more courage to keep on expanding what I do and to really develop a sound model of intercultural language teaching and learning as part of my ongoing practice. I documented my reflections and used the evaluation process to change direction when it was required. This documentation process was the big difference in my approach and it really helped me to see what was working and what wasn't. Getting into the habit of documenting my observations allowed me to think the process through instead of losing critical and valuable information that so often changes classroom practice in mutually beneficial ways.

- http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/timetoteach/cogs/curricplanframes3.htm

MATERIALS AND EXEMPLARS

- I have included a cross-section of student work from their **Alla Spiaggia** journal. The comments made by the students covered a whole range of experiences, feelings and prejudices. I enjoyed reading them and saw how strongly the personalities of the students were reflected in their work.

- I have included the alphabet worksheets to show a small part of the TL covered.

- I have included my teacher's journal because it shows the progress of the investigation step by step and my evaluation of each step.

EVALUATION

The investigation validated what I was already doing in my teaching practice and has provided me with the tools to further develop and expand my intercultural approach. I really enjoyed the freedom this approach encourages because it allows the personal experience to inform the direction of the investigation and it reminds me as a teacher that what my students think and feel has a direct bearing on how they approach and own the set tasks. It also allows the students to be part of creating the direction and the outcomes they want.

In future I would have students working in teams on literacy tasks that required them to make sense of the language structures and how the language fits together. This approach was successful when they had to make linguistic connections for the vocabulary they wanted to use in their bilingual mind maps and word banks and needs to be extended to incorporate sentences and short paragraphs.

I was not interested in recording or filming the investigation and I did not feel that it was necessary. There is already enough technology surrounding these students and at times it can be counterproductive and invasive.

I have learned how valuable it is to record my observations and consciously reflect upon them. I have always done mental evaluations but I realise that writing things down is the transformative step in changing and improving my teaching practice. If I don't write down what I see, hear and feel I lose the sort of valuable information that can really make a difference to my ongoing practice.

The surprising aspect of the investigation was the student's bias towards their Australian experience as if the Italian experience was not even worth bothering about. This is so insular and focused on self. And why not? Well I would really like to challenge that in any future investigation by encouraging them to look at it from the Italian point of view. This would require a more thorough look at how Italians spend their holidays by the sea, when and with whom, and the significance of this in their lives. I think that this would help to break down the cultural barriers that prevent the students from understanding life as it is lived and valued by Italians.

REFLECTION

This investigation has been an invaluable experience for me. I was beginning to feel that the neglect the teaching of languages has suffered in Australia over the past twenty years would continue their decline. I do feel that the intercultural approach addresses the issue of the survival of languages in the primary school because I believe that it empowers the teacher to take control of the process of delivering a program that is relevant to the cultural times we live in, and to the needs and experiences of the students.

I have been using this approach over the last three years although I didn't have a name for it. Now that I have a more structured framework to work within, I am able to use the processes that the investigation put forward as a way of planning my units of work. I feel that it marries very well with the Board of Studies Curriculum Guidelines and is one of the missing links that supports the outcomes of the curriculum document. I was able, in the course of the investigation, to give greater substance to *Using Language, Making Linguistic Connections* and *Moving Between Cultures* by using an intercultural approach.

I believe that the main areas of the investigation were explored extensively and that students did consider their experience of Australian beach culture in depth. They did discover truths about their own

experiences and the value of those experiences by being exposed to Italian beach culture and having to consider what they thought of it.

The investigation has allowed me to focus on how I teach and where I need to make improvements. An important outcome for me is that I have more confidence to deliver a program not as a *fait accompli* but as a work in progress that I am not solely responsible for creating but in partnership with the students.

I have enjoyed the experience greatly and hope that there will be follow up seminars and ongoing workshops.