

ILTLP CLASSROOM-BASED INVESTIGATION REPORT

TEACHER'S NAME	SCHOOL	LANGUAGE	YEAR LEVEL
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CONTEXT			
<p>This is a class of 14 students in a government comprehensive high school in Sydney's western suburbs. The suburb is growing in its multiculturalism but is still heavily dominated by families of British descent. The students are of mixed ability and have been learning Japanese from 1 – 3 years. Two students have NESB parents, for the others my Japanese class is their only experience with other languages and cultures. My own family history is Australian, with an English / Scottish background. I grew up in this same area as my students and attended this school, so my students and I relate very well to one another. I was fascinated by foreign culture and language at an early age, probably because of the 'sameness' of all those around me. I chose to work with this class in my investigation, as they are a small group of cooperative, keen and motivated students who enjoy working with me, and with whom I already enjoy a high level of teaching and learning success.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">AREA OF INVESTIGATION</p> <p>I planned to introduce an intercultural focus into a language unit I was about to teach and had already planned. The topic area was school, specifically talking about how you get there, how long you are there, how many people are at your school and what you do there. As students have been taught about school in Japan in year 7 and year 8 before, I decided to focus on giving them a much broader outlook than the stereotypical images they probably had on school and students in Japan.</p> <p>Ask any language teacher and they will tell you that they already teach culture. It was important for me to understand how ILTLP is different and if it could improve my current teaching practice. My area of investigation became twofold – to allow the students to interact with a range of stimulus materials from Japan, then to examine if the students noticed a difference in the way I taught and they learnt.</p> <p>When planning a unit I usually start by looking at what the textbook demands, then work out how that fits in with the requirements of the syllabus. Any cultural understanding would be delivered via the textbook or by sharing anecdotally my own experiences with the students. This time I started with that form of planning as usual, but I also examined the range of realia I had at my disposal and how I could arrange activities that would allow the students to engage with the materials themselves. The planning of this unit took me therefore 3 days instead of my usual 3 hours.</p>			
CLASSROOM PRACTICE			
<p>For this report I will focus only on what I did that was different to my normal language teaching.</p> <p>To start the unit I gave the students a sheet of true and false statements about school in Japan and had them complete the sections they already knew. I informed them that by the end of the unit they would be</p>			

able to complete the rest.

During the unit, I arranged for two exchange students to come in and chat with my students about their experience of school in Japan. This exchange took place in Japanese and English with me interpreting in between when necessary.

I also organised 'workstations' – a range of materials that the students could look at, read and discuss with a partner if they chose. I designed worksheets to get the students thinking about the materials they were working with, as well as providing support to help the students understand the language in the materials. The tasks involved understanding texts in the target language, but discussing their own thoughts in English. The workstations were:

- a textbook article in English about Japan's seniority system in school
- a page from a Japanese school's newsletter in which students write about what is most important to them
- a stencil from a Japanese school showing the uniform and rules about how it is to be worn
- a Japanese magazine about starting school
- a documentary in English about Education in Japan which included some language learning
- a collage of videos and photos that I took when visiting Japanese schools
- a segment of a Japanese movie 'Swing Girls' about students stuck in summer classes.

The class was very keen to work on these materials, especially the video. I bought 2 mini DVD players with headphones, which the students could watch, that the students were very excited about.

I also tried very hard to not tell the students about my experiences, nor tell them what I think or the answers to the questions. I allowed the students the time and space to engage with the materials and to discuss their own thoughts together.

DATA OR INFORMATION GATHERED

Collecting the data was the hardest part for me. As all teachers are pressed for time, I heavily rely on my instincts and personal reflection about student engagement as I walk out the classroom door to determine the success of a lesson. I initially missed great data collecting opportunities – such as videotaping the exchange students' visit. I also overlooked students' questions as valuable data collection, viewing them as signs of things they didn't know, instead of seeing them as proof that the students were engaged and thinking about what they were noticing!

I improved as I continued. The students completed the worksheets that asked them to notice values and practices and to compare them with their own. I videotaped them as they worked, as well as watching their behaviour, the questions they asked and their engagement with the materials.

At the very end I gave students a reflection worksheet which they completed individually, examining their thoughts on the unit and if they noticed any differences to our usual practices.

Finally, I recorded an hour's conversation in which we talked about their understanding of the materials they had experienced, and their feelings about the unit as a whole. I transcribed this (which took hours more than any teacher would ever have to reflect on a lesson).

In addition to the students' own reflections, I wrote down my own thoughts after the lessons, to see if my initial judgements were in line with the findings after viewing and listening to the proof.

FINDINGS

I discovered that my students do not usually think much, nor do I expect them to offer opinions in my usual teaching. From the transcript of our recorded reflection:

Teacher: "At the very start of the unit I noticed some people were uncomfortable when I gave you a sheet and you had to write if things were true or false...Everyone wanted to know if it was true or false straightaway.

Student: We didn't want to think.

Several: Yeah, yeah.

Some students were very superficial with their answers, just trying to get the work done, rather than thinking carefully about their answers. Another asked me why we were doing these activities and what purpose there was other than learning about school in Japan. She obviously noticed a change to how we usually worked which unsettled her.

I learnt that with highly prepared lessons I became redundant during the lesson, as students were quite happy to work on the materials and discuss them with one another, coming to me only occasionally for help.

My students are not quite able yet to draw their own conclusions about why their learning matters, and at this stage they require a lot of guidance and support in thinking in this way that is new to them. From the activities I planned my students noticed the following:

'We (Japanese and Australian students) value the same things in life' – Student

'(Like Japanese students) I think we should clean up as it gives a sense of teamwork.' – Student

'It gives me the impression that they are very neat, nice and friendly. They look very well behaved when wearing their uniform.' – Student

'Appearance is very important to them.' – Student

'They aren't as well behaved as I thought. Also their language is more laid back.' – Student

'I think that (the seniority system) is a good system because it helps people keep manners and how to behave appropriately.' – Student

Follow up and feedback is vital because students do misunderstand some things or miss them completely. The article I gave them about the seniority system explained that the seniors looked after the juniors. Most students missed this point:

'I think it's a bad idea because the elders don't respect the juniors.'

In terms of reflection on ILTLP, the students did notice the difference in my teaching and reacted positively:

'(I liked) that we got to do something different for a change. E.g. interact with the laptops and DVD players and magazines' - Student

'We did this unit in a more productive, exciting way.' – Student

One completely unexpected finding arose from an interview I filmed with a Japanese schoolgirl. In it, I asked her a range of questions about topics that my students learn, to give them the opportunity of hearing familiar language from a native speaker. In the interview, she laughs quite frequently at my questions. My students raised the question: 'what was so funny?' I asked them to put themselves in the same situation. They came to the conclusion that even though the questions were linguistically correct, culturally it was strange for her to be asked where she lived, and what her pet ate, by a teacher she just met. They realised that the context meant she expected a different set of questions. I showed the students this interview with the expectation that they would be pleased they could understand so much language. Instead, it demonstrated to them how artificial our language learning could be at times!

INTERPRETING THE INFORMATION

The students noticed the difference in my teaching this unit and were very excited about the differences. Our concluding conversation was essential in clearing up any misunderstandings that the students had. I gave the students the opportunity to express themselves in writing as well. This became very interesting, as I discovered that students who were quiet during the discussion actually were more insightful in their responses than the chatty ones that dominated the conversation. Some people need to verbalise their thought processes to reach conclusions, others prefer to listen, think to themselves and just get straight to the point. In my planning of future activities, I will need to ensure that all students are given the

opportunity to work in the way that they need to.

I am hoping that in future lessons the students will become more adept at thinking for themselves and that I will need to participate less in their conversations. Being the person who has had the most contact with Japan, I am naturally the expert in the room. My usual teaching has very much been the teacher expert tells the students what she thinks. The students and I were very comfortable with this arrangement, so my students were reluctant to think by themselves at first, but improved as we progressed. I will need to equip my students with the confidence and tools they need to think for themselves.

This unit has involved a huge amount of preparation but it was worth it. Of course, I now have the resources to use again. This style of teaching also freed me up in class to observe and interact with the students for 3 whole lessons. I was able to leave the lesson refreshed and with a good knowledge of each student's capabilities, instead of walking out exhausted from one hour of full on teaching.

Well-designed worksheets helped students access the resources in the target language, as well as guiding them through the thought process from noticing, to comparing, to reflecting on how that learning matters. Some of the worksheets left students just at the noticing stage and so I will need to improve those.

Videotaping a lesson is a very valuable tool in analysing what learning is really taking place, because when you are involved in it you are not as astute as when you are witnessing it. I also got to see that I offer my opinion more than I thought I do, and I would like to try to withhold my opinion a little more in the future to allow the students to think more themselves!

One problem I encountered is that while working on these items the students' language acquisition stagnated. I expected that would be the case because of the nature of the tasks requiring so much thinking in English. I now face the new challenge of equipping students with the language they need to be able to discuss similarities and differences in Japanese. I am incorporating this in the next unit I am planning for my students. They will still be able to discuss in English if necessary, but I will be giving them the skills to discuss in simple Japanese.

Something unexpected happened. Most students in this class are vivacious. For the 3 lessons that they worked on the workstations they were absolutely silent. It was a little unnerving for me to sit and watch the quiet instead of participating in raucous conversation, but what peaceful and thought provoking bliss it became in a day otherwise filled with constant noise!

My investigation went to plan in most respects. I initially visualised radically changing the whole unit, but reality set in and made me censure myself with my new mantra: 'baby steps, baby steps'. I have a tendency to want to whirlwind in and change the world, but old habits are best changed one step at a time. Time constraints, such as my involvement in other projects that took me out of school, and HSC conduct and marking for many nights and weekends meant I did not have the time I would have liked to devote myself to completely rewriting the unit. The 4 ILTL lessons I planned instead, plus the lesson dedicated to reflection were enough to investigate the differences to my usual teaching practice and to form a conclusion. I did expect that my fabulous questioning would lead students to the final conclusion that stereotyping gives us too narrow a view of people, but it did not get there for most students without a lot of help.

MATERIALS AND EXEMPLARS

I created a number of worksheets and I have a selection of worksheets that the students completed and which show that my students did not always come to the conclusion I intended them to!

I believed that their image of Japanese students was that they were all academic and perfectly behaved. In order to give them a broader outlook, I decided to show them an excerpt of the movie 'Swing Girls'. It starts by showing girls who are stuck in summer vacation make up classes because they are failing. It also shows beautifully that within that group, there are different sub groups. I hoped my students would watch it and realise that while Japanese students might be more studious as a whole than Australian students, of course there are those who are not, and of course there are different cliques, just like in Australian schools.

The first worksheet was completed before they watched movie, to find out what they already thought

about Japanese school and students.

The second sheet was completed while watching the movie. In the second half of the second sheet, I expected students to come to the conclusion that we can generalise about what a group of people are like, but that in reality everyone is different and the world is full of many types of people. The answers I collected prove that my students had a narrow stereotypical view, but that they need help in drawing conclusions about stereotyping people and getting past the initial glimpse that all look and behave the same.

The third worksheet was a reflection about the whole unit. The reflection sheet also demonstrates another danger – that if you show students one thing they can take that to be the gospel truth, so it is very important to follow up with discussion.

Finally, the transcript of our recorded reflection lesson shows what happened when I tried finally to achieve the aims I set out to. The students needed a lot of prompting, and eventually I grew frustrated that they weren't getting it and ended up telling them what I wanted them to think. I will need to work on that!

EVALUATION

This investigation has taught me that if I become a learning facilitator instead of a teacher, my students learn better and are much happier. Instead of telling my students what I know and think, I can provide them with opportunities to experience culture and reflect on it themselves. This new style of working took both students and me out of our comfort zones, but we grew used to it and liked the changes.

The next time that I teach this unit I would like to intersperse the periods of cultural understanding with more language acquisition. I also need to work more on formalising the assessment of intercultural outcomes. I have the students work, but I need to work on a clear scale for assessing their levels of achievement, rather than stating that it is excellent, good or developing. I felt very confident in planning the learning activities, but am still developing my understanding of assessing it (intercultural learning). I am working on the next unit of work to achieve this, looking at descriptors for assessing the intercultural elements of a writing task that they will be completing.

The most powerful ingredient of this style of teaching is the realia you can present for the students to engage with. In the past, I would plan my teaching units based on what was in the textbook. Now I will be looking at what cultural resources I have available and planning what language learning can be incorporated with those. I am currently drafting a new scope and sequence for my students 7- 10 and textbooks will be used occasionally instead of being the bread and butter. This will be my 3rd time to reprogram since 2004 but I am so passionate about intercultural language learning that I have to do it!

My trips to Japan will also have new purpose. In the past, I have collected items that appealed to me, brought them home and put them in the back of a cupboard to be pulled out once or twice. I have a list of specific items, photos and video footage I need to collect to use in my teaching of my new units. Now when anyone asks is there something I would like them to get for me when they are in Japan I have an answer ready!

I did discover an unexpected bonus in this investigation. In the past, I have presented my students with 'safe texts' – texts that have been scripted using only language they have become familiar with. It was my concern that students would be intimidated and overwhelmed by realia that had too much unknown Japanese, making them feel as if learning Japanese is an impossible task and that they might as well give up now. Actually, the students enjoyed looking at the real items such as DVDs, magazines, and school newsletters. When the questions I wrote supported them in their understanding of the texts, they felt safe, and were excited to be able to read the texts. The benefits of engaging with something real outweighed their concern at it looking difficult. They felt reassured by the fact that I could not read some of the texts either, and I like that they are getting a realistic expectation of language achievement instead of expecting to 'learn Japanese in 30 days'! As long as students are supported and that real texts are interspersed with safe texts, the students are happy.

REFLECTION

Participating in this investigation has changed my language teaching life! I have always been an innovative teacher, constantly looking for new ways to engage my students and to keep my own boredom at bay. However, as a product of successful language teaching myself, I very much teach the way I was taught. That means a heavy emphasis on language acquisition, which was enlivened now and then with cultural tidbits thrown in. I believe that the pressure of what students must achieve by the HSC in the few lessons I have access to them also adds to this compulsion to focus on vocabulary and structures.

With the introduction of our new K-10 syllabus including the outcomes of 'Moving Between Cultures' I was guilty of looking at that and proclaiming: 'Of course I teach the students about cultural differences already, that's what makes Japanese so appealing to me.' This investigation has shown me that in reality I taught my students about my journey of engaging with Japan and moving between my own and Japanese culture, instead of allowing the students their own journey.

For a long time I have been struggling with incorporating Quality Teaching Practises and catering for the needs of Gifted and Talented students while still making learning accessible for students with learning difficulties. I could justify that I do already, but I am honest in admitting there is always room for improvement. I have found that improvement – by allowing students to reflect on their own journey of engagement with Japanese culture as they are learning the language, there is so much scope for higher order thinking skills to develop.

Resources that I have brought back from Japan, movies I enjoy watching for my own learning, items given to me from Japanese schools that were previously neglected in drawers because they did not fit in with the textbook, now form the basis of my teaching. More than anything this investigation has taught me how important recent contact with the country is and I am so grateful for the opportunity I received to study in Japan this year with the Endeavour Language Teaching Fellowship. Without that experience, I would not be so well equipped to teach in this fashion.

I feel alive in my teaching, it is so mentally challenging and stimulating for me to personally find, organise and present these learning opportunities for my students. To be honest, I did expect that I would come to the conclusion that the amount of effort required to teach in this manner would leave me worn out and that would outweigh any possible benefits. It has been the opposite – I am on a high, completely invigorated by how much I enjoyed preparing the unit and how much happier my already content students were. I also have come to the realisation that the language students will acquire will be much more meaningful than simple exchanges such as 'what time do you brush your teeth?'

When I joined this project, I was already interested in intercultural language teaching, and had already created individual lessons based on its theory. I was having difficulty in working out how to assess it, so I joined expecting answers. I was annoyed that we were given no answers. I was pressed for time, I do so much in my life, and like my own students, I wanted to be told what to think! However, this journey of coming to an understanding of how ILTL is different and the benefits of it has been great. The sessions we had once we started working on our investigations, were very supportive in helping me come to my own understanding. I still don't have the exact answer I came looking for, but am confident I am going to be able to name it as I engage further with intercultural language learning.

It is like all the pieces of the puzzle are falling into place. I have been given a gift of realisation - while learning another language is important, what really bridges the gap between people is cultural intelligence and understanding. Only a small proportion of my students ever continue to the HSC. As a language teacher, of course it is natural to focus on ensuring my students learn language! When I think however, about what I achieve in my career as a language teacher, and what matters most to me, it is that people learn to accept and embrace difference, while understanding how they are similar. Participating in this project has given me the ability to bring language learning and cultural understanding back into their natural balance.