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Discussion Paper 1

**Why the intercultural matters to languages teaching
and learning: an orientation to the ILTLP programme**

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Discussion paper

Why the intercultural matters to languages teaching and learning: an orientation to the ILTLP programme

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In the context of globalisation, with the extraordinary movement of people and their ideas, it has been increasingly recognised that people need to be interculturally capable, that is, be able to negotiate meanings across languages and cultures. In such a globalised world, the bilingual/bicultural person is the norm. This need has implications for the way we live our lives and interact with others, for education in general, and for languages education in particular. Languages have a central role in this context because they mediate the interpretation and construction of meaning among people.

If education is to engage students in life, learning, and future employment, in this context, it needs to change. Many of the current initiatives developed by educational systems seek to respond to this need. Languages education is an integral part of these changes. The challenge in languages education is not only to acknowledge the intercultural but for teaching and learning to be intercultural.

This requires an orientation to languages teaching and learning that focuses on the lived reality of interaction among people in the context of multiple languages and cultures. Such an orientation:

- recognises and develops students' capability to integrate in interaction in the target language an understanding of themselves as already located in a language(s) and culture(s), and an understanding of the same in others – that is, acting simultaneously as performer and audience (Crichton, 2006);
- focuses on how such understanding affects and is affected in and by interaction with others
- invites students to stand back or decentre from their own linguistic and cultural perspective to consider diverse perspectives of others;
- understands that in intercultural interaction, the ethical consequences are always heightened
- connects with contemporary curricula and pedagogies, that emphasise students' initiative in making sense of their own learning.

Current approaches in languages education, such as communicative language teaching or task-based language teaching do not adequately address this challenge.

The issue, however, is not just methodological. Rather, it concerns the way we understand language, culture, learning and teaching. What is needed:

- in relation to *language*, is a view of language that not only recognises that it is a structural, grammatical system or that it foregrounds language in use, but also that it is always subject to the variable interpretation of participants in interaction;

- in relation to *culture*, is a view of culture that not only recognises facts about or ways of doing things in diverse cultures, but also that culture informs the way people understand themselves and others;
- in relation to *learning*, is a view of learning that not only recognises the need to acquire new knowledge and to participate in communities of users of that knowledge, but that learners are always would-be interpreters;
- in relation to *teaching*, is a view of teaching that not only recognises the need to impart knowledge and create contexts for using and applying it, but also that teachers inevitably mediate that knowledge.

An orientation to languages teaching and learning that sees language, culture, learning and teaching in this way is what we describe as *intercultural language teaching and learning*. This orientation builds on work across a range of disciplines that have sought to understand how people make sense of themselves, their world, and other people.

In communicating interculturally students come to know that the forms of a language and knowledge of facts about culture are only part of what is involved when people interact to exchange meanings in the particular target language. They are important only as socially shared communicative resources that people draw upon in different ways in different contexts. The variable sociocultural contexts of use which students experience as participants in communication across cultures cannot be reduced to an inventory of items to be mastered. They are too rich and variable. For students, managing the variability is part of the process of learning to be intercultural.

The ILTLP programme provides a forum for exploring these kinds of ideas. The goals of the programme are to:

- elaborate the group's understanding of the intercultural as it applies to languages teaching and learning;
- identify the implications of an intercultural orientation to languages teaching and learning for developing a long-term plan for learning;
- explore the assessment of the intercultural in languages teaching and learning;
- plan and carry out an investigation of an aspect of intercultural language teaching and learning which promotes intercultural teaching and learning in particular contexts.

The ultimate goal of the programme is to invite teachers to develop an investigative stance through talking, interacting, thinking and questioning, in this professional learning programme and through noticing, documenting and enacting change within their own classrooms.

Reference

Crichton, J.A. 2006. Identity as performance. Lecture presented in the course: *Language and Identity*. University of South Australia. October. 2006.