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Culture knowledge and intercultural learning

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Culture knowledge and intercultural learning
Issues to consider from a teacher's perspective
A discussion paper
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Most Languages teachers teach two types of cultural knowledge in their language classes:

a/**culture as background**, for example when teaching facts about geography or history, when teaching cooking or songs, what Kramsch (1991) has summarised as the four Fs: foods, fairs, folklore and statistical facts and,

b/culture as **cultural codes embedded in language**. For example when we teach French greetings we teach about kisses and the difference between *tu* and *vous*; and when we teach Japanese greetings we teach about bowing and that *konnichi-wa* (good day) as a once-a day greeting does not correspond exactly in meaning to the Australian-English 'hello' or 'hi' (Toyoda and Ishihara 2003).

There are of course many overlaps between these two ways of categorising cultural knowledge but this distinction is useful in identifying the different layers of knowledge we deal with in the languages classroom.

In intercultural language teaching and learning in relation to teaching culture, we don't change everything we have done so far but we do it from a different perspective. This means that we continue to teach background culture but we bring an intercultural perspective into it. We also teach more of, and more systematically, cultural norms linked to language use, and this also from an intercultural perspective. The distinction between background culture and culture in language use is of course artificial, the two can and do overlap.

In both cases the adding of an intercultural perspective in our teaching means both: *more cultural knowledge* (or more factual knowledge) in the first instance, for reasons I explore below, and beyond this knowledge *more intercultural learning* (or more subjective knowledge) the meaning of which I also explore in this paper. More culture knowledge and more intercultural learning do not mean less *language* learning, on the contrary. It means more in depth language learning as intercultural language teaching and learning focuses on the deep connections between language and culture and how these connections produce meaning.

I- More cultural knowledge as the first step towards intercultural language teaching and learning

Intercultural language teaching and learning pedagogy in this project has been described as involving four main activities:

Noticing differences between C2/L2 and C1/L1[1]
Comparing differences between C2/L2 and C1/L1 and
Interpreting and Reflecting on these differences
Interacting on the basis of new learning

Whilst taking account of these three phases of learning in lesson planning, an important decision a languages teacher still has to make in intercultural language teaching and learning is

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[1] C2= target culture and L2= target language (LOTE) - L1/C1= learners' first language and learners' first culture, for the majority of learners it is Australian-English and White Australian Culture. Of course many students in LOTE classes do not have Australian-English as their first language or first culture but all learners have a knowledge of both. Intercultural language teaching and learning includes comparison with languages other than English and cultures other than White Australian culture. However, the starting point of comparison is usually with English the dominant 1st language (and culture) of learners.

input, that is what kind of material will be used as the basis of a class activity. Language and culture teaching do not happen in a vacuum. Whether it be a song, a dance, a recipe, an extract from a dialogue, a movie or the page of a textbook, a decision has to be made on the kind of input which is going to best trigger and then continue to support the type of learning sought. This means knowledge in the first place, knowledge as in already knowing/having the material or knowing where to look for new language/culture input. The second issue for the teacher is to know enough of the C2 (and L2) in the chosen material to be able to interpret the selected culture and language input. The third issue is to be able to compare new C2/L2 input it with C1/L1. This in turn implies knowledge of C1 and L1, at least enough of it to know how to best engage students in the process of comparison, including knowing where students are likely to find evidence of cultural difference.

Let's take a concrete example: if I am to teach a French Hip-Hop song to my Year 10 students, for instance, I need to know first some historical and socio-cultural facts about French Hip-Hop in order to be able to choose an appropriate song for my class and later to be able to interpret the content and language of the song. I also need (without needing to be an expert) some information on how French Hip-Hop differs from Australian Hip-Hop to be able to participate in and guide a fruitful discussion among students where the two are compared. Even if I were to ask students, as part of a cultural activity, to find a French Hip-Hop song somewhere, as a teacher I would still need to know about French Hip-Hop in assessing the work students would do with their chosen material. Alternatively, I could also ask students to select a song, or myself choose a song that has lyrics appropriate to something I was teaching, having this time very little or no knowledge about the history or sociology of the type of music involved. I could then investigate, research with students the musical as well as socio-cultural background of the song. The approach to any topic/content depends on the exact aim of the intended class activity, how much language work is wanted, how much time is available. For some activities the teacher's previous knowledge may be crucial whereas in more research-based task, finding-out information may be more the priority, giving less focus to language work *per se*.

Cultural knowledge as much as fluency of the language taught are not only linked, they are both necessary as the foundation for rich and successful intercultural teaching. For the languages teacher acquiring cultural knowledge along with linguistic knowledge and maintaining both up-to-date is an on-going task. Recent efforts in sending more languages teachers to the target country to improve/up-date their language skills and 'visit the tribe' for more cultural knowledge will need to continue to support the wider implementation of an intercultural perspective in Australian languages education. Other measures such as better access to up-to-date resources and IT knowledge to access and re-use resources on the Web are also crucial issues in supporting adequate intercultural language teaching and learning.

Different and similar issues for the native and non-native languages teacher

When discussing teachers' knowledge it is useful to make a difference between native and non-native languages teachers though both groups have a lot in common in terms of knowledge needs.

Many teachers who are non-native speakers of the target language for instance have to learn more of and/or constantly need to upgrade their knowledge of C2 and L2. Native-speakers of the target language may have less C2 and L2 knowledge to learn in terms of quantity but they too have to upgrade their 'native' cultural knowledge and they have to learn often for the first time or/and upgrade at least their C1 and L1 factual knowledge. For instance, an Australian-born teacher with high-school knowledge of the target language and culture and no in-country experience of C2 faces a sharp learning curve in catching up with C2 knowledge as well as still learning and up-dating C1 knowledge. Conversely, a native-speaker Chinese teacher recently arrived in Australia will have (at least initially) enough knowledge of Chinese culture but faces a sharp-learning curve in learning about Australian culture. Equally, a native-speaker French

teacher with no real contact with France for 20 years also needs constant learning and upgrade in C2/L2 and C1/L1.

Putting these kind of differences aside between native and non-native languages teachers, what all teachers need more of for implementing intercultural language teaching and learning is conceptual knowledge as well as factual knowledge of culture embedded in language.

Conceptual and factual knowledge on cultural norms embedded in language use for all languages teachers

In my French Hip-Hop example, the kind of culture knowledge I referred to is culture that comes more obviously under the category of (current) background culture though it has a lot of culture/language content more so than a class on French castles for instance. Background culture is often described in the literature as more tangible culture that is easier to see. Culture in cultural norms, more intimately linked to language in everyday interactions, is harder to see and hence harder to teach. Lo Bianco and Crozet (2003) have referred to this kind of culture as *invisible* culture for this very reason. Invisible culture such as cultural norms amounts to cultural information. Before teaching this kind of culture from an intercultural perspective teachers need to know more of it or at least know where/how they can find it or help their students to find it. This requires more conceptual learning about the links between language and culture.

Knowledge of invisible culture is an issue for both native and non-native languages teachers, with one main difference. Native teachers may know intuitively about cultural norms in language use but sometimes their intuitive knowledge is personal. Hence they may teach a regional norm as a general norm, or an old norm people no longer really use. For the non-native teacher relying on a trip overseas where some observations were made may be a good starting point but not always a reliable one. Constant checking and updating is also needed for teaching invisible culture. At the same time, it is also important to recognise that culture is variable and to aim to teach 'a' perspective, a possible interpretation, rather than the ultimate and only cultural truth on the matter.

II - Beyond cultural knowledge, intercultural learning

Having made the point for cultural knowledge for languages teachers, I will now explore the meaning of intercultural learning.

I have referred to culture knowledge as factual knowledge or information. In contrast intercultural learning has to do with subjective knowledge that is the turning inward of cultural information through self-reflection leading to enhanced understanding of the role of culture/language in the construct of worldviews (one's own and others) and allowing for conscious positioning of self when confronting difference, a process referred to in some intercultural language teaching and learning literature as the finding of a third place. Though now contested this notion of 'third place' is still a functional concept in describing in two words the complex processes involved in negotiating difference.

In the context of a class activity the turning inward of cultural information happens when learning goes beyond the surface level of the culture/language input as first introduced by the teacher. It happens when the compressed and complex cultural data expressed in often simple language, or other forms of cultural expression involving little language (eg. a painting or a regional dish) is broken down. It applies to the teaching/learning of both background culture and cultural norms in language use.

Intercultural learning unlike cultural knowledge cannot be taught but it can be modelled by the teacher in interaction with students. In the same way, intercultural learning is not in essence about learning new knowledge but about becoming a different student/person. For both

teachers and learners it is about letting new culture/language input turn inward and letting it shift/transform their original world view. In cases where there is resistance to the new culture/language input, the turning inward process of course still happens but can lead to a reinforcement of one's world view rather than a transformation of it.

This is the essence of intercultural learning as I understand and have lived it so far. It is about teachers and learners as dynamic complex human beings who make choices and as such are a lot more than recipients and transmitters of cultural and linguistic information.

How are teachers to best support this understanding of intercultural learning is at the very heart of the ILTLP project. There are no definite or universal set of guidelines to this kind of learning. Claire Kramsch has suggested that intercultural learning is more about *being* a different teacher and by extension a different language learner rather than adopting new recipes for teaching and learning languages. Further insights into what being a different (intercultural) languages teacher means can be elaborated from a theoretical standpoint. It is however the practice or *being in the act of teaching the changes we want to see* and the reflection of this lived practice which is more likely to bring new conscious understandings of what a successful intercultural languages teacher is doing differently in the classroom. It is this very opportunity that teacher-participants in the ILTLP project have been given.

Conclusion

Culture (and language) knowledge together with intercultural learning are the two pillars on which a successful implementation of intercultural language teaching and learning needs to rest. Though seemingly appearing as a progression from one to the other or even a split, they are both complementary, the two sides of the same coin and I believe need to feed on each other.

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