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Discussion Paper 2

The challenge in developing learning programmes in intercultural language learning

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Introduction

Thinking about programming for intercultural language learning presents us with a fundamental tension between traditional and more recent views about curricula and programmes. Traditional questions to be addressed in curriculum and programme design have focused on objectives, 'content', activities, and outcomes, and the effort to map these in some coherent way across defined spans of time. Inevitably, by promoting the content of curricula and programmes, these questions have led to the standardisation of curricula and programmes: the selection, ordering, and standardisation of content expressed as knowledge and skills, and statements of predicted outcomes. This standardisation pre-structures both what will happen in the teaching and learning process and teachers' interpretations and understanding of teaching and learning. If the goal becomes only to 'cover' the 'content' there is little space for attending to the people involved: namely their relationships, connections, diversity, individuality, and meaning-making. What was neglected here was a consideration of how the learning programme was actually experienced by the participants, primarily the teachers and students, and in particular how teachers and students interact (see for example Bullough, 2006; Mayes, 2005; Greene, 1973). The meaning-making of people in interaction, a process in which they necessarily draw upon their whole cultural make-up, is the very focus of intercultural language learning, and it is this focus that learning programmes for intercultural language learning need to incorporate. This paper explores the implications of a shift from the prioritisation of content in programming to the prioritisation of interaction.

Programmes and programming in a traditional perspective

Traditionally, programmes of study have been developed as a documented account for teachers that set out the scope (range, extent, depth) of the learning that was to take place in a lesson, a week, a term, a semester, a year, or across a span of years. Whether a short-term programme (a lesson/a week/a term) or a long-term one, it specified, in the main, the 'content' that needed to be learnt. In the languages learning area, this was most frequently described as a set of themes and topics, grammatical structures, and vocabulary, a listing of characters to be learnt, a listing of possible contexts, roles, situations, possibly a list of cultural items to be included, a list of text types and a list of skills, and subskills to be developed. There was some discussion normally about which items were for 'receptive' as opposed to 'productive' use, and how these items were to be ordered. The programme, however, did not specify how these items came together because that was seen as a matter pertaining to pedagogy, and it was not considered necessary to include pedagogy in programmes. With communicative and task-based approaches, programmes included some indication of the kinds of activities or tasks that comprised the learning programme, and there was an outline of the resources that would be used. Again, there was some discussion about what constituted a task and how tasks were to be ordered, but essentially groups of tasks were ordered within topics or themes. The scope of learning was defined primarily by a notion of 'coverage', that is, the 'content' that needed to be worked through as items of learning per se or within a task, within the designated time frame. Most frequently, the scope was expressed as particular chapters or units in the textbook that was selected for the programme, or as specified items from the kinds of lists indicated above.

With regard to the ways of understanding students, in traditional programming it was recognised that the 'needs and interests' of the students needed to be taken into account. This led to the process of needs analysis becoming the precursor of programming. However, two problems arise with needs analysis. The first relates to the terms or categories by which learners' needs were identified. These were normally understood in terms of the categories

of the programme, e.g. the themes and topics of interest to learners, the grammatical items needed to accomplish a task, etc.; thus the categories constructed the needs.

The second problem with the analysis of students' needs relates to the fact that the programme tended to 'freeze' the description of the learners' needs when, in fact, these are constantly changing.

Practices differed in schools and systems regarding the degree of freedom teachers had in programming. Generally, it was recognised that much of the work in programming was personal and that individual teachers would want to exercise their own preferences in designing programmes to match their own teaching styles, beliefs, and values, as well as their particular context. No matter the style of programming, however, it was understood that a programme placed learning into a structured time frame, a notion that reinforced a sense of linearity.

Schools and systems provided professional advice to teachers regarding programme development mainly through the concept of 'best practice'. The work of excellent teachers was show-cased without necessarily highlighting the integral relationship between the school, its community, teachers, students, and the substance and processes of learning.

Developing programmes within an intercultural language teaching and learning orientation presents a challenge in relation to these traditional views. This is because the 'content' of language and culture and the 'needs analysis' of the learners are only a part of what is involved in learning to communicate interculturally in a particular language and culture at any particular time and over time. The essential feature of intercultural language learning is its focus on the interpretation, the making and the exchange of meanings in interactions among teachers and students, processes that are central to both the communication and the learning. These processes are not amenable to being listed as an inventory of items, and therefore cannot be presented as such in a programme.

The traditional view of programming is derived from a view of learning understood as a process of accumulating items of factual knowledge, which are tightly sequenced and organised hierarchically (Shepard, 2000). These items are to be explicitly taught by teachers and are received, internalised, and incrementally stored in the minds of individual students. With the recognition that learning is socially and culturally mediated, that students construct understandings within a sociocultural context, that new learning is shaped by prior knowledge and cultural perspectives, and that intelligent thought involves meta-cognition or self-monitoring of learning and thinking (Shepard, 2000), a different kind of programming is needed, one that also takes into account learners as interpreters and meaning-makers.

Programmes for intercultural language learning need to focus on:
- meaning-making in interaction, and
- learners as meaning-makers.

A focus on meaning-making in interaction

Interaction is central to intercultural language learning. Interaction here, however, is understood as more than 'tasks' as understood in traditional programming. It focuses on the process of interpreting and making meaning, which requires participants to draw on their whole linguistic and cultural repertoire. It captures the lived reality of communication, whereby students come to understand their own location in a language(s) and culture(s), and the same in other people. In any interaction learners act simultaneously as performers and audience (Crichton, 2006), contributing their own meanings and seeking to interpret those of others, considering the impact of their contribution on the other and another's contribution on them, and recognising the ethical impact of the exchange, that is, understanding how they perceive and are perceived in communication. More than documenting the thematic content or tasks, a programme for intercultural language learning needs to capture the opportunities/scenarios for interaction and the process of interpreting interaction.

These interactions are content-rich. They are about themes and topics and about their participants. They incorporate themes, grammar, vocabulary, skills, processes, and contexts that comprise the 'content', and they integrate these within learning experiences which draw upon and develop interpretations made by the learners. The interactions should capture both experiences of dialogue/exchange and the simultaneous thinking, analysing, interpreting, explaining, elaborating that occurs in communication in real time (what Sfard (1998) refers to as participation), while drawing on a range of 'content' (what Sfard refers to as acquisition).

The challenge in developing programmes for intercultural language learning is to find ways of describing these interactions understood in this way, since they are largely omitted from traditional learning programmes. What needs to be described in the programme is the nature of the intended/planned interactions, together with rich and challenging inputs such as texts, or a central question that will stimulate the exchange of views, or a consideration of multiple interpretations brought to bear by other participants. By documenting the interactions, the teacher and students have an opportunity to review the range and variety of interactions provided as a starting-point for dialogue. By describing them in some detail, the teacher and students also have a sense of the increasing contextual variability and complexity of the considerations that students need to take into account in participating in the dialogue. Both this range and complexity of interactions are important dimensions of developing the scope of learning at any moment in time and over time.

A focus on learners as meaning-makers

Given that the goal of learning languages within an intercultural orientation is to enable students to come to understand how they understand themselves and the world, and how meaning is interpreted and created in the act of communication, then, in developing programmes, it is necessary to focus on learners as meaning-makers. This means going beyond canvassing their 'needs and interests'. The process of understanding the social, cultural, and linguistic make-up of learners and the diverse experiences that they bring to the learning is a continuous one that is integral to understanding their evolving interpretations and meaning-making. More than students' 'needs and interests', it is their ever-developing interpretive capability (the distinct, ever-developing, interpretive resources the student brings to the act of learning) that is of interest to the teacher, because it is this 'culture within the person' that informs the way individual students see the world. This culture is dynamically developed in an ongoing way, as each experience of interaction builds on previous ones and draws upon and extends the interpretive frame of reference of the individual. The challenge in programming is recognising that in addition to working with 'content', they are working with the interpretive frame that students' bring to and develop in learning and that this interpretive frame is ever-changing. The focus in programme development, therefore, needs to shift from an exclusive consideration of the 'content' of the programme and the 'needs' of learners to the 'knowledge/content' as understood by learners in relation to their particular, evolving, interpretive frame.

Programming as dialogic

A programme focused on learners as diverse, ever-developing and individual, on the one hand, and on interaction to interpret and make meaning, is necessarily dialogic. In this context, while the teacher, knowing the learners well, can anticipate a great deal about the interactions (their purpose, key questions to stimulate reaction, noticing and comparing that lead to learning, resources to challenge thinking), he/she also understands that any interaction cannot be fully specified in advance. There will always be a degree of unpredictability because it is not possible to fully anticipate how particular individuals (both students and teachers) will interpret particular contexts. The programme cannot fully predict and represent how individual students interpret experiences, and it is this personalised interpretation and understanding of experiences that is developed ultimately through interaction in intercultural language learning.

The programme and the teacher represent one part of the dialogue; the other must be provided by the learner and the teacher's response to the dialogue-in-action as constructed in the moment. Traditional programming assumes full predictability because of the focus on standardisation. Programming, understood as dialogic and as needed for intercultural language learning, questions this assumption.

The challenge of the element of unpredictability and the fact of only ever being able to capture a part of the interactions may lead to questioning the value of developing programmes at all for intercultural language learning. Even if the documentation can only ever be partial, value resides in documenting the scope of learning interactions (the range, variety, and complexity) as a point of reference for monitoring the nature and extent of variability that students have the opportunity to work with, and the range of resources (focus questions, direct input, texts, learning scaffolds, and examples) that are brought to bear to generate learning.

Reconceptualising programming

Developing learning programmes for intercultural language learning does not involve simply addressing issues of methods or approaches to teaching and learning or issues of preparing a product or artefact to be used as a basis for 'managing' the teaching and learning process. Rather, it is a conceptual matter that relates specifically to how the teacher, as developer, conceptualises language learning, and his/her part in the dialogue with learners.

Given the central role of the learner as interpreter with his/her own interpretive capacity, and the teacher as interpreter, how they each understand interactions cannot be fully anticipated. With ongoing experience, experimentation and reflection, teachers continue to build into their programmes the benefit of continuously working with both the unpredictable and the novel in students' responses.

Developing programmes for intercultural language learning

In developing programmes for intercultural language learning teachers need to:
- create a range of opportunities for different kinds of interactions/different kinds of participation that bring to the fore students' roles as both performers and analysers as they interpret and try to make sense of the nexus of language, culture, learning, and communication and developing their understanding of themselves, others, and their world.

  Consider: What kinds of experiences are afforded to students and why?

  What constitutes 'a range', given that interaction/ participation is not generic?

  How do we know how students understand the nature of interaction/participation in particular cases?

  How will the particular interaction/kind of participation promote interpretation and creating meaning?

- include various resources/artefacts to support interaction, reflection on interaction and thereby promote learning, e.g. teacher talk/input ('content' and processes), focusing questions, the use of challenging texts, scaffolds, and examples to stimulate learning.

  Consider: What kinds of input/questions/texts/scaffolds are examples for diverse students?

- include content, concepts, skills that are best learnt through direct instruction.

  Consider: What aspects are best taught explicitly?

  How are they to be explained/elaborated?

- include opportunities for analysing language and culture in interaction and learning.

  Consider: How do we develop the role of the learner as analyser?

- recognise that there is no single end point of development of students' knowledge and understanding and that a feedback process needs to be included in the programme for monitoring the ongoing development of students' interpretive frame.

  Consider: What does the students' participation reveal about the interpretive frames they
  bring to language learning?

  What exactly is each individual learning? How do we know?

  How does each student make sense of the intercultural interaction and analyse his/her experience in his/her own terms? How does each student personalise his/her knowledge/explain it to himself/herself? How do we best develop this explanatory dimension?

  How is individual development best monitored through the programme?

  How is teacher learning through the experience of teaching captured so as to inform ongoing refinement of the programme?

- recognise the relationship between learners, learning, programming, and classroom practices.

  Consider: How does the programme contribute to the culture of learning created in the classroom?

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