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Discussion Paper 4

The importance of questioning in intercultural language learning

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Introduction

Phase 1 of the Intercultural Language Teaching and Learning in Practice (ILTLP) project involved teachers of languages from Australian states and territories working closely with one or more members of the project research team at the Research Centre for Languages and Cultures Education (RCLCE) at the University of South Australia, in an ongoing cycle of design and teaching, feedback and modification.

Throughout Phase 1, feedback to teachers developing units of work or long term plans was often given in the form of questions, intended as a means of encouraging teachers to articulate their thinking and rationales for decisions for student learning in the programmes designed to support intercultural language learning. The significance of questioning was highlighted during this phase, and its importance as a process for intercultural languages teaching and learning became increasingly evident. Because the nature and content of the questions is highly relevant to student and teacher interactions, written feedback was reviewed to determine the kinds of questions being asked of teachers by members of the project team. It became evident that similar questions were being used by many team members, for all year levels and across a range of languages.

The most frequently asked questions are discussed below, grouped thematically, around the three areas most prominent in the range of questions. These are questions:
- related to student learning experiences, specifically the involvement of students as participants as well as observers in the learning process; and a focus on what students 'take away', in an overall sense, from their learning
- that sought to identify teacher thinking behind programming
- concerning making clearer links between language and culture.

This paper extends the discussion on feedback given to teachers introduced in Discussion Paper 3 '*Developing programming for intercultural languages teaching and learning: insights from project team feedback'.* Considered together, these two papers provide a picture of the nature of the feedback and the kinds of questions being asked in this project, which are indicative of talk and questioning that inform intercultural languages teaching and learning. Discussion Papers 7 and 8, *'Before' and 'after': changes to programming arising from a feedback process'* and '*In conversation with Nhu Trinh'*, provide an example of programming and a teacher's perspective on the feedback and questioning process in Phase 1 of this project; and Discussion Paper 2 *'The challenge in developing learning programmes for intercultural language learning'* provides background to tensions in programming for intercultural language learning and foregrounds the need to indicate teacher and student questions as part of the process of dialogue in intercultural language programmes. This collection of discussion papers begins to address issues that provide challenges for languages teachers adopting an intercultural stance, and which require further dialogue amongst educators involved in developing this stance.

Student learning experiences and gains

The greatest number of questions posed by the team members addressed student learning outcomes. This focus was not in the sense of 'outcomes' as traditionally understood, but, rather, as that learning that students gain as the culmination of their intercultural learning experience. Often teachers were expressing student learning objectives in generic terms, drawn directly from or closely related to outcome statements in their curriculum frameworks. Team members felt that these did not get to the heart of the languages and cultures concepts they were asking their students to explore. Questions related to this theme centred on the need for fuller identification of specific objectives as they relate to the particular group of students and to the detail of what was being explored, linguistically, culturally and interculturally. A desire to see more clearly how students would make meaning of the language was also clear in the questions. Questions related to student learning included:

- *What are the important language meanings, structures and know-how that students will come away with?*

- *What does all of this mean to the students?*

- *What is it that you want students to learn/ discover linguistically, culturally and interculturally?*

- *How meaningful is the learning to learners' lives?*

- *What do learners make of this? What do they notice? How are they positioned in this learning?*

- *Are learners required to*
    - *think comparatively about Languages and Cultures?*
    - *generalise from their observations of particular languages and cultures to languages and cultures in general?*
    - *notice / perceive patterns of similarities and differences within and between languages and cultures?*
    - *reflect and respond to what they see and understand about languages and cultures?*
- *How do students see themselves as…?*
- *How do they interpret …..?*

The emphasis of these questions is on meaning-making for students. These questions are in line with the idea expressed by Kramsch (1993) that for students to learn interculturally, the learning needs to be personalized; it needs to matter to them. Further to this, students need to be involved as participants as well as observers, in order that their learning builds on their existing knowledge and understandings, as the frame of reference which students use to interpret and construct meaning.

Articulation of teachers' insights and thinking

As well as identifying student thinking and learning, the questions focused on a similar need for fuller articulation of the teachers' thinking, their underlying rationale for the decisions they make in relationship to the learning programmes, and the role they themselves would have in the learning process. Team members felt that programming styles tended towards minimalist explication of content or topics, leaving out the reasons why these topics are being explored, and what conceptual learning- linguistically and culturally- is intended. At one level, this is totally understandable, as a programme is often a resource to be interpreted by the teacher, the author. The teacher knows what she/he means, and carries this information in his/her head, not feeling the need to add this to the programme. In this case, often an entry in a program is just a tag to an extended thought process. Team members felt in planning for intercultural language teaching and learning, it is the reasoning that underpins the use of particular content and its intended purpose for the students, that need to be articulated. In addition, others reading programmes and unit designs cannot readily see the underlying thinking and do not know how a small unit of content is relevant or tailored to its particular target student group. Team members felt the programmes became more meaningful when details concerning teachers' thinking were added. This thinking is particularly valuable when it is also shared with students. Questions addressing teachers' roles and thinking included:

- *What is the thinking behind this? What are you getting at?*

- *What will you keep emphasising as a teacher across different aspects of the programme and how will it build over time?*

- *How can the concepts/ motivations that drive us be brought to our teaching?*

- *Is essentialised knowledge/ description being avoided? How can you include such description?*

- *Where are you in this plan? What role do you play in the learning process?*

- *How do you reveal yourself as participant in the teaching/learning process?*

- *What makes this plan appropriate to the particular year level?*

- *What links the programme together?*

- *What are the larger concepts you are getting at?*

Clearer links between language, culture and intercultural understanding

A further focus evident in the questions was the need to ensure that there were links between language, culture and intercultural understanding, and that these links underpinned the planning, teaching and learning processes. Many questions related to this issue, as it was evident in some planning that language and culture were seen as being separate; that is, that 'language' elements, such as vocabulary and grammar were viewed and taught as separate from 'culture' elements, such as customs, rituals, daily routines and celebrations. These ideas are captured in the questions, which include:

- *Can you consider the two cultures in comparison and in connection?*
- *What is the language and culture connection?*
- *Are communication tasks exploited interculturally?*
- *What aspects of 'other language-ness' are being explored?*

- *How do learners move from one language & culture to another – how do they compare languages and cultures?*
- *How do the two languages and cultures (and others) interact with each other?*
- *What makes this program intercultural?*
- *What is the language learning/ development and how does it relate to the cultural focus?*

- *What is it about the learning of this concept or about this issue that can only be explored in a languages classroom?*

- *How are the linguistic and cultural elements related to this issue linked, and why is it that to understand one, you need also to view it through the lens of the other?*

Practice implications

Questioning is a technique in classroom dialogue that seeks clarification, prompts deeper thought, and provides opportunities for further discussion and learning. In addition, questioning provides insight into teaching and learning processes. Reviewing the questions asked in the learning process of Phase 1 has revealed a focus on the *participants* in the learning process, the students and the teachers, and the importance of the contexts in which teaching and learning occurs, as well as identifying the need for greater amplification of dialogue between teacher and students and students and students. The centrality of the need to ensure links between language and culture in an intercultural orientation to languages learning is also highlighted through investigation of the questions, where this issue was raised again and again.

Implications for practice arising from this process are that the role of participants in intercultural language teaching and learning must be carefully considered in programming, and that awareness of the unique forum for learning offered in a languages classroom needs to be paramount in teachers' thinking. Utilising an intercultural orientation to teaching and learning languages, we have the opportunity, through exploration of language and culture and their inextricable links, to understand ourselves and our worlds better, providing meaning and insight that cannot be gained in other ways. The set of questions gathered here provides a starting point for teachers developing plans for intercultural language learning and in reflection on practice.

References

Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching* (chapter 2). Oxford: Oxford University Press.