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## **Discussion Paper 5**

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**Language choices in the intercultural classroom**

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## Discussion Paper 5

### Language choices in the intercultural classroom: a discussion paper

Anthony J. Liddicoat

#### **Summary**

*Intercultural language learning gives a place to the use of both the target language and the learners' first and/or other language(s). There is a need to develop a balance however as each language contributes differently to learning. The aim of language choices is to develop an informed approach to using as much of the learners' language repertoire as needed to enhance learning. The balance of languages will differ according to the features of individual classrooms, but the use of each language is not random, but rather relates issues such as learning focus, modes of communication, degree of creativity and participants. Both languages can be used in combination to achieve a range of communicative aims.*

#### **Why is there an issue?**

Language teaching has always involved the use of both the language of the target language and the language of the learners, but different approaches to language teaching have viewed the use of these languages in different ways. Communicative Language Teaching – the methodology which has informed most contemporary language teaching – has usually emphasised the need to use only the target language and this requirement in language teaching seems problematic for teachers who want to engage their students in deeper reflection about language and culture. In theories underlying Communicative Language Teaching, a distinction has been made between “acquisition” and “learning” (Krashen, 1981). Acquisition is understood as an unconscious process by which language learners develop hypotheses about language based on the meaningful input they receive. Acquisition occurs when learners understand a message in the new language which is just beyond their current level of proficiency. Some researchers (e.g. Swain, 1993) have also argued that there is a role for meaningful output in developing proficiency: that is producing language which is comprehended helps learners to test and re-evaluate their hypotheses about the target language. Learning conversely is considered to be a conscious process of memory, understanding and thinking about language. This view suggests a heavily cognitive, rather than a social, view of language. Some researchers have believed that only acquisition was relevant for language learning and that learning never contributed to acquisition. If acquisition is the driving force of language education, then the task of the teacher is to maximise the amount of input that learners experience and so, ideally everything should be done in the target language. In reality, Communicative Language Teaching has rarely ever been this “pure” in its approach to the processes of language education and learning has continued to play a role in classroom practice.

There are three key problems with the idea that language learning is a process of acquisition based solely on understanding input and producing output. The first is that acquisition and learning are not separate processes with no interrelationship. More recent research has shown that learning – that is conscious attention to language – is important for developing accuracy in language use, while acquisition develops fluency (Pienemann, 1989). Ideally learners need to be accurate and fluent and to manage increasing complexity (Skeehan, 1998), so learners need rich input (hearing/reading the language), opportunities for output (participation interaction) and explicit teaching. The second problem is that the view of language learning adopted by Communicative Language Teaching is based on the idea that learners develop

towards a (monolingual) native-speaker norm: that is the native speaker is the measure of the learners' performance in the language. The reality of language learning is, however, that learners become bilinguals: people with two (or more) languages and cultures which they bring to every interaction. The language learner does not need to know how to become a monolingual native speaker, but rather a person who can interact, negotiate meanings and establish interpersonal relationships between languages and cultures (Kramsch, 1999). The third problem is the idea that language learning is only about gaining communicative proficiency in a language. This view removes from language learning the dimension of deeper conceptual and reflective learning relating to language awareness, intercultural understanding, the relationship between language and identity, values, emotions, etc., and using one's learning to participate in a linguistically and culturally diverse world (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, & Kohler, 2003).

### ***Choosing languages***

Intercultural language teaching and learning seeks to develop both proficiency in the target language and deeper cultural, linguistic and personal knowledge and so requires a different approach to questions of language. The ways in which language is used in the classroom need to support and develop language "learning" as a broadly conceived goal. The development of language proficiency requires a maximum exposure to the target language and maximum opportunities to use the target language meaningfully. Most importantly, language learning is a deeper, conceptual activity which involves explicit discussion and analysis of language, culture and learning: it is a process of dialogue and reflection based around language and the culture that is embedded in it and communicated through it. Conceptual and reflective learning requires learners to formulate, articulate and respond to complex ideas, using language which is beyond their level of capability in the target language. Moreover, conceptual learning cannot be delayed until learners' have become proficient in the vocabulary and grammar of the language, but must begin at the beginning of their language learning. Conceptual learning will therefore involve opportunities to use the learners' own language. The vital question in planning language use in the classroom is to achieve a purposeful balance between the languages used, ensuring richness of input and output, but not inhibiting conceptual learning.

The nature of the balance between languages will vary from classroom to classroom relating to individual variables such as cognitive development, language proficiency, learning purpose, personality, etc. However, there seem to be some basic dimensions for consideration which underlie the planning of language use in the classroom, which include:

- **Learning focus:** Where the focus is on the language itself, then maximum use of the target language is desirable for both teacher and learners to allow for rich input and output. Where the learning is focused on conceptual development and reflection and analysis? then there is a legitimate role for the first language to enable learners to formulate and express ideas and to say what they need to say. Nonetheless, this conceptual development needs to be based on the target language itself, and the stimuli, the texts and talk which give rise to this thinking, need to be in the target language. Also the teacher can use the target language to express his/her own ideas and can introduce learners to some of the language they need to express their own ideas.
- **Modes of communication:** Written language should normally be in the target language, as the processes of reading and writing allow opportunities for

monitoring, adjusting and reflecting on the text, although in the case of reflective journals it may be necessary for students to use their first language in order to express their insights and analyses. Spoken language has greater restrictions. Listening is less linguistically demanding than speaking and so ideally can be done with the target language, although again talk about more complex issues, such as identity, attitudes, etc., may need to be supported by the students' own language. Speaking, when it involves active creation of ideas and meanings, may need to draw more heavily on the learners' existing language resources.

- **Degree of creativity:** Routine language use is less demanding than developing and communicating new and original ideas. Language which is used frequently, e.g. for classroom organisation, should be in the target language. Moreover, commonly used questions may also be asked in the target language, even where the answers are likely to be complex. When learners express conceptually complex ideas, however, they may need to do this in their first language. At the same time, there is also learning involved in knowing how to express complex ideas in simple language, so the students' first language should not be the immediate default for expressing complex ideas, but rather be seen as one option.
- **Participants:** It is important for the teacher to maintain target language use as much as possible to create an environment which legitimates and supports the expression of meanings in the target language. Learners, however, may need to use their first language in order to engage in learning. Teachers, also, may need to use the students' own language when the discussion is more elaborated and complex – issues of culture, identity etc require a lot of expressive talking through, and experimenting with ideas – and while the teacher can still use the target language for routine responses – agreeing, confirming, questioning, applauding, etc – they too will need to express more elaborated ideas which learners may not be able to understand in the target language: the driver for language choice is the depth and richness of discussion and the learning which needs to be achieved.

A further issue for consideration is the idea that interactions in the classroom need to occur in either the target language or in the learners' first language. In reality, this isn't the way bilingual people use language. One of the most notable features of interactions between people who share two or more languages is that they use their whole language repertoire creatively for communicating. This is also a possible approach in the language classroom. In bilingual interactions, linguists often use the term "matrix language" to describe the main language used in an interaction into which words, phrases or sentences of another, shared, language are introduced for communicative effect. In the classroom context, it would seem desirable to establish the target language as the matrix language, and allow learners to enrich their communication in this language and to allow creative use of the students' whole linguistic repertoire in constructing and communicating reading rather than insisting of "purity" of language use.

### ***Questions for discussion***

1. What factors play a role in the choices made about the language to use in your classrooms?
2. What sorts of conceptual and reflective learning are most relevant for your students? How can language choices best support this learning?

3. How can your learners be supported in developing the capacity to engage with more complex issues in the target language through language teaching?

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