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Discussion Paper 6

Assessing intercultural language learning

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Discussion Paper 6

Assessing intercultural language learning: a discussion paper

Angela Scarino

Assessment is the least well-developed dimension of intercultural language teaching and learning. This is due at least in part to the fact that it does not simply involve an individual, personal quality or skill or item of knowledge that can be learnt, developed, and assessed. Rather, it is a social phenomenon that necessarily requires interaction. Interaction involves other people and, in assessment, this raises the question immediately of the way in which the involvement of others influences the performance, and therefore, whose performance is actually being assessed in any interaction. The complexity in assessing within an intercultural perspective also results from (1) the diverse ways in which intercultural language learning is understood i.e. how the construct is described, and therefore determining exactly what is to be assessed (2) the difficulty of taking variable linguistic and sociocultural contexts into account, and (3) the constraints of traditional views of assessment.

Assessment of the intercultural as a construct

A number of approaches to assessing culture have been developed where culture is described as a body of knowledge, facts, or descriptions of phenomena. These approaches have tended to emphasise the assessment of knowledge of culture as a fixed body of knowledge of a set of facts about the target culture, removed from people as constructors and users of that knowledge. This view of culture does not capture what it means to engage in an *intercultural* interaction or dialogue focused on the exchange of meanings. Nor does this view capture what it means to operate as an *intercultural person*, that is, being both a performer and an analyser of experiences of interacting with people in diverse contexts across languages and cultures, which is what the intercultural in communication and in learning entails.

Other approaches to assessing intercultural language learning and communication include attitudinal tests (Cadd, 1994; Seelye, 1994), culture assimilator tests (Brislin *et al.*, 1986) and cultural awareness tests. These procedures tend to reduce intercultural communication to binary oppositions (us/them; self/other) which do not reflect the socio-linguistic and cultural complexity evident in intercultural interactions. A particular difficulty with cultural awareness assessments of this kind is that they tend to focus on cultural (not intercultural) knowledge and meta-awareness, often with minimal connection to language in use, that is positioning the person being assessed as an analyser rather than a performer of intercultural experiences.

The most elaborated model of intercultural competence and its assessment is the model of *savoirs* (French for 'knowledge')(*savoir comprendre* – knowing how to understand, *savoir apprendre/faire* – knowing how to learn/do, *savoir s'engager* – knowing how to engage/commit, *savoir être*) developed by Byram and Zarate (Byram, 1997; Byram & Zarate, 1994) and its use as a basis for assessment as elaborated by Byram (1997) and extended by Sercu (2004). Sercu proposes that the Byram model of *savoirs* be extended to include 'a meta-cognitive dimension', that is self-regulating mechanisms that enable students to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning processes. In addition to the limitation noted by Sercu, the model of *savoirs* does not elaborate on the important ways in which language affects culture and culture affects language, and what this means to the learner as an interactant or performer in communication.

The difficulty with any modelling is that inevitably it involves some form of categorisation or breaking down into component parts. This componential conceptualisation then mitigates against a holistic understanding of the capability (intercultural understanding, in this instance) and equally, a holistic view of assessment is backgrounded while an analytic, 'component parts' view is foregrounded.

In assessing intercultural language learning it is necessary to take into account that it:

- is a multi-dimensional and at the same time a holistic capability;
- entails language learning, awareness, *and use* in communication; specifically, this involves using language as a performer, in interaction to interpret and construct meaning and analysing and reflecting upon this experience and continuing to learn from the use of language in intercultural interactions;
- is developed over time.

The difficulty of taking variable linguistic and sociocultural contexts into account

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 diverse sociocultural contexts of use that 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. Intercultural communication is situated in particular contexts that include students' interpretations of the context; these interpretations include not only knowledge of linguistic forms and cultural facts, but also the meaning the individual learner makes of these in context. From the point of view of assessment, therefore, it is necessary to assess not only knowledge/subject matter, but also students' personal engagement with that knowledge. This includes assessing students' ability to negotiate language use as participants within variable contexts. This process, however, cannot be managed successfully without students knowing what is the same and different in different languages and cultures.

In assessing intercultural language learning, therefore, it is necessary to take into account that:

- it is developed through experience of interaction in a range of variable contexts;
- students need to learn to manage this variability and managing the variability is integral to the understanding that is to be elicited in assessment;
- it involves not only seeking to draw out students' understanding of intercultural language experiences as observers of others' participation in interaction, but, most importantly, drawing out understandings of themselves as participants in intercultural interactions, that is, how students understand the distinctive social and cultural context of each communicative performance.

Constraints of traditional views of assessment

In the broader context of educational assessment there has been an important shift over the past 20 years that relates to changing understandings of the process of learning. Whereas learning was seen traditionally as a process of accumulating atomised bits of factual knowledge, which were tightly sequenced, organised as a hierarchy, and which had to be explicitly taught (Shepard, 2000; Gipps, 1999), it is now recognised that intellectual abilities are socially and culturally mediated, that students construct knowledge and 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: 8). The clear message from research about learning is that it is an active process of knowledge construction and sense-making, a process that is essentially cognitive, social, *and* cultural (see Sfard, 1998).

The assessment paradigm that is best aligned with traditional views of learning, and the conception of culture as a fixed body of knowledge, is the psychometric paradigm. The focus within this assessment paradigm is on standardised testing of fixed content through objective procedures and the basic approach to understanding student learning is through comparison with either the performance of other students (norm-referencing) or a predetermined standard or cut-score (criterion-referencing). The assessment paradigm that is best aligned with more recent views of learning and the understanding of the intercultural as a process of developing personalised knowledge, is the contextual and personalised paradigm (Mabry, 1999). The focus within this assessment paradigm (often referred to as 'performance' or 'authentic' or 'alternative' assessment — see Gipps, 1994; Gardner, 2006) is on constructed-response assessment procedures, rather than selected response procedures such as multiple choice, and subjective evaluation of personalised learning for each individual.

In the context of differing paradigms, in assessing intercultural language learning it is necessary to take into account that it:

- requires assessment of both students' performance of communication in the target language in variable contexts (students as performers), and how they explain the intercultural to themselves (students as analysers);
- includes feedback from peers and student self-assessment as part of the social processes that mediate the development of intellectual abilities, the construction of knowledge, and the formation of student identities (Shepard, 2000: 4);
- requires an emphasis on self-awareness as a performer in communication, for both the student and the teacher/assessor.

Given the features of intercultural language learning, its assessment needs to:

- involve interactions in the target language on the part of students in which they negotiate meaning through the use of language in diverse contexts among communicators from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and in which students are required to decentre from their own language and culture;
- elicit students' developing understanding of the social, cultural, and linguistic construction of human experience and the way our enculturation affects how we see the world, interact, and communicate in the world;
- involve eliciting students' meta-awareness of the language-culture nexus in such interactions and that students be able to analyse, explain, and elaborate this awareness;
- position the student as both performer and analyser in interaction, though in any individual procedure one or the other role may be foregrounded for different purposes;
- elicit students' developing use and analysis/understanding of the use of language in communication
- ensure that students learn from the ongoing direct experience of the target language and culture;
- draw upon a range of assessment-types including interviews, conferences, journals, observations, story-telling, and capture students' cumulative learning so that development and progress can be taken into account, for example, through portfolios;
- include self-assessment that recognises learning as a personal process;
- include dimensions that require reflection on the part of students on their developing knowledge and understanding.

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