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## **Discussion Paper 9**

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**In conversation with Nhu Trinh**

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for  
Languages  
and  
Cultures Education



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## Discussion Paper 8

### In conversation with Nhu Trinh

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#### Introduction

Discussion Paper 7 in this series discussed the 'before' and 'after' programmes of Nhu Trinh, a teacher participant in Phase 1 of ILTLP. The 'before' and 'after' programmes were developed during a process of feedback with project team members, as teachers developed units of work and long term plans for their classes. Nhu's programme was for her Year 4 Chinese class, and changed considerably over the course of Phase 1, incorporating richer detail about the specific outcomes she was intending for her students, her own thinking behind these intentions and developing more targeted intercultural interactions. The nature of feedback provided to teachers during this Phase is explored in Discussion Paper 3. This paper provides Nhu's perspective of the feedback process, and is intended to consider the notion that dialogue lies at the heart of the intercultural language learning process. In this paper we incorporate Nhu's perspective as part of the dialogue. It is hoped that information gleaned from this process will assist both teachers and support professional learning facilitators for those assisting teachers to develop an intercultural stance in languages learning.

#### The conversation context

Nhu and I met at her school, around three months after the conclusion of Phase 1. I had prepared a set of focus questions and forwarded these to Nhu prior to the meeting (see Attachment 1). Nhu had moved schools since completing Phase 1 of the project, changing from teaching Chinese across the primary school years to taking a Year 6/7 class, as well as teaching Chinese to all upper primary students in the new school. Her change in circumstance offered an added dimension for the purposes of this interview and the project, as it provided an opportunity for Nhu to compare the two roles she had and to assess the transferability of her understandings and learning about intercultural language learning to a new context.

Contextually, it is important to recognise that Nhu was one of a number of teachers involved in the group feedback process during Phase 1; that Nhu has prior experience of and has studied intercultural language learning with members of the project team providing feedback (while other teachers in the group had not); and the group discussion was intended to be one of a number of ways of providing feedback to teacher participants.

I asked Nhu the questions, and we talked around the ideas that arose from these. This is my construction of our conversation, with Nhu's comments in italics. Nhu has provided feedback on this paper prior to its publication here.

#### ***The application is much harder than the theory***

When asked 'what does intercultural language learning mean to you?', Nhu made the distinction between what she understood the question from a theoretical or 'big picture' perspective and how this understanding affects her as a teacher. She explained that she had been engaging with concepts of intercultural language learning over an extended period, including being enrolled in a Masters degree in Languages Education at the University of

South Australia at the time of her Phase 1 involvement. She had therefore worked in some depth through aspects of theory and principles of intercultural language teaching and learning and felt she had a solid grasp of 'interculturality' conceptually. Furthermore, she felt her own background experiences, which include a variety of diverse cultural and linguistic contexts (Vietnamese, Chinese and English/Australian) in Vietnam and Australia, provided her with rich opportunities for understanding interculturality through lived experience.

Nhu's understanding of intercultural language learning is that it is

*highly personal, and requires drawing on your own background and experience, and this is what I want my kids to be able to do*

In a class situation, however, especially with very young students (5 and 6 year olds), she found it difficult to find ways to help them understand others' experiences and discuss the differences, similarities or relevance of these experiences for themselves.

*How do you get the concept of diversity across to those with so little experience? How do we 'go to China?' It's hard to go there at this stage as their understanding is not deep. In a class situation there is often 'mummy's idea' and then there is my idea. Finding ways of discussing the principles of intercultural language learning with these children is harder to deal with. The application is much harder than the theory.*

With slightly older students, Nhu found it easier to work with an intercultural perspective. This is why she chose to work with 8 year olds for her Phase 1 unit. When she planned her unit, one of the thoughts that was foremost in her mind was that she wanted to see how Year 4 students would respond to concepts and principles of intercultural language learning, as she thought them 'ripe for it'. She believed 8 year olds would have further experiences than the 5 and 6 year olds to draw on, and, importantly, would be able to use more target language (Chinese). She described the questions she focused on, in planning her unit for this group as:

*What concepts can I explore with these students?  
If I can, then how can I explore these concepts, using Chinese as well as English?  
How can I design the unit so that the kids become aware of these concepts?  
How can they speak Chinese and show their thinking and interpretations through their own lenses?*

Nhu reports it was much harder to include these concepts in the classroom than in her planning documents, and felt that she 'grappled' with the issue of application being much harder than understanding the theory throughout the teaching of the unit. The 'grappling' required she rethink and produce revisions or new iterations of her plans, a practice not uncommon for teachers in the process of teaching, as they respond to student responses and reflection on their own practice, but accentuated in this instance where the concepts she was attempting to explore and engage students with were complex and new for her students and herself.

### **Responding to feedback**

Nhu and Phase 1 participants were provided feedback from project team members Angela Scarino, Michelle Kohler, Andrew Scrimgeour, Kate Loechel and Anne-Marie Morgan on their planning and implementation in a number of face to face group meetings, individual one-on-one sessions and through written feedback. Nhu describes the group sessions as 'not too useful' in helping her grapple with the difficulties of application in the classroom, identified above. She found these sessions 'too theoretical', the information often 'too generic' and they did not address in sufficient detail the 'how' questions she asked above at a level of actual

linguistic examples she could use. As the group of teachers included teachers of different languages at different year levels and different levels of experience with intercultural language learning, it is not surprising that this might be the case, especially as Nhu had had considerable experience of the theoretical and generic aspects from her own studies. Nhu felt that much of the talk was valuable for those teaching Years 7 or above, such as talk around the use of high school textbooks, but not for her. Nhu views the intercultural language learning principles as requiring 'higher order thinking' and, though she believes these apply to her primary school aged students, a focus on these has so far failed to provide her with sufficient concrete examples of what she might actually do with her students, at the level of 'the detail of the classroom context', and she did not find answers to how she might include these processes in her teaching at the group meetings.

Nhu found feedback given one-to-one much more useful, which is to be expected, as the issues pertinent to Nhu, her context and programme could be addressed directly. The one-to-one feedback helped her to develop her programme and frame interactions for her class, building on her knowledge of the 'generic' as she sought more specific detail. When feedback related to her specific context and plan was provided by another Chinese speaker it was particularly useful. Nhu commented

*It is important to have language-specific feedback and to be able to apply this to the language speaking process. Dialogue between two adults able to understand the process in the language helped me make it more achievable for Year 4s.*

Nhu stressed that because she had already engaged with the theory and principles of intercultural language learning through past courses and professional learning opportunities; the 'big picture' ideas were not what she wanted from the feedback process at this time.

*I wanted to work at the practical level. When I had one-to-one support in terms of organising the programme, and for language suggestions, I was able to come up with my own programme for the kids.*

It was clear that Nhu was able to better apply her developing theoretical understandings through assistance that focused on the transferral of this learning to the practice context, in a reflexive manner, as pedagogical 'praxis', where theory and research inform practice and practice feeds back to the theoretical aspects of learning.

## **The journey of Phase 1**

During Phase 1 Nhu was working on her Masters with Angela Scarino and Leo Papademetre. She found the study tied in well with her Phase 1 programme development and classroom unit-trialling process. She found the course satisfied her needs for academic engagement with the intercultural stance in language teaching and learning. She was pleased to have the opportunity to trial these ideas in her classroom, as applying the principles of intercultural language learning was what she wanted to explore, to realise the theory in the classroom.

*I still grappled with how to apply intercultural language learning in the classroom with the language. I grappled with the 'how' of doing it. I didn't want to explore the concepts and have the discussion all in English- otherwise I might as well have been teaching Studies of Asia, not Chinese.*

Nhu recognised that the 'grappling' was part of the continual process of teaching, not as a theory/practice divide, but in relation to the learning and understanding constantly in process for both students and teachers. Some of the concepts or 'principles' of intercultural language teaching and learning were difficult to explain to her students and for them to grasp, and she

recognised that higher order thinking tasks may not be able to be performed by students in their limited target language.

*Reflective thinking is difficult for the students if it is too abstract, and was not what I wanted if it used too much English.*

Nhu found that she absorbed greater depth of the 'big picture cultural tools' along the Phase 1 journey, and this further understanding 'did encourage and influence me'. She found, however, that she still lacked sufficient tools or strategies to apply the principles of intercultural language learning in the target language or to find ways through the target language to address the ideas of intercultural language learning. During Phase 1, she

*realised this was the job for me- to figure out how to use those big picture concepts. I found this really, really hard. I'm just beginning to find an answer. I've absorbed the ideas in my head- but how to do it in the classroom, I'm still finding out. These are the same questions I am now exploring in my Masters.*

Nhu looked at a number of different ways to introduce language concepts into her intercultural teaching stance. She found notional-functional grammar ideas helpful, and could combine these well with intercultural language learning principles. For example, she began to group Chinese grammar into nouns and verbs, and colour coded cards to assist students to understand this. Once students had grasped this, she noticed them being able to use the language more flexibly, and hence were then able to get at the intercultural concepts and ideas behind the words and find their own meanings in the language they were using.

*Kids felt successful and could use the language in different ways- their own ways. This freedom with words led them to them being able to 'use' the language rather than rote learning it, which is a step towards an intercultural perspective, as it began to mean something to them. I mean, what is the point of rote learning whole sentences that 99.9% of the time will not apply to a situation you are in. Rote learning only works for a few really good students who can learn a lot, not for the others, who will never find a situation where they use the particular phrase they have learnt.*

### **Using understandings in a new context**

When asked if she was able to use the learning that occurred in Phase 1 in her new school, Nhu replied 'absolutely!' Her students in her new school have never studied Chinese before. Nhu describes speaking to the staff when she first came to the school, and that her understandings gained about intercultural language learning were in fact a highly positive 'selling point' for the introduction of Chinese to the school, with further relevance across other areas of the curriculum that related to the state curriculum document orientation.

*Most of the staff had believed that languages and Chinese in particular, could only be learned by rote instruction. I explained that second language learning need not be about rote learning, and involved individuals thinking for themselves. An intercultural stance in language teaching and learning applies across all the SACSA Framework (South Australia's curriculum framework) 'essential learnings' (these are 'futures', 'identity', 'interdependence', 'thinking' and 'communication'), and language learning should be seen as a thinking/learning area equivalent to all the others.*

With her students, Nhu found she could begin to introduce Chinese to them utilising an intercultural language learning stance as she understands it. As she is new to the school, and is getting to know the students, she has adopted

*an explicit focus on 'making connections' (one of the intercultural language learning principles)- me with the students; them with each other; them with the language and culture. We're looking at how the language works and what it means to them individually.*

Nhu is continuing to use her functional grammar 'tools' and is finding this, along with her intercultural stance, is generating

*a faster understanding, that is surprising. They are able to experiment with sentence construction using the 'pieces' I've provided- like a jigsaw. They can experiment with putting them together to make their own meaning. They are using that other intercultural language learning principle-'active construction'- for making their own learning and meanings. They are becoming aware of how they feel and how others might feel- or what the 'authentic text' says the others feel.*

In summary, Nhu has found her work with her new classes 'very effective', but adds

*It is only week six. Ask me in two years- or at least at the end of the year.*

### **Concluding remarks**

Nhu's comments speak of the overall value of dialogue in this project. She acknowledges that the exchange of feedback helped her to clarify her thinking and develop interactions for her classroom adopting an intercultural stance. She also identifies the most useful aspects of the feedback process, in particular the one-on-one work in developing language specific detail in her programme. The conversation with her highlighted the importance of individual teaching, class and school contexts, and that no one generic plan will fit all circumstances, as the individual teacher and students impact on and determine what can be achieved and how the learning will occur. Further, the dialogue with Nhu reinforces the idea that it is the interaction process itself between teacher and learners that constructs the intercultural language learning.

What also became clear is the need for a programming process in intercultural language learning that continually re-examines what it is teachers are trying to achieve with their students and how this can be developed as the classroom teaching and learning occurs. Dialogue offers a 'sounding board' for this reconsideration of programming and push the teacher to think more deeply about possibilities for achieving their desired intercultural learning processes and outcomes.

From Nhu's experience, it can be seen that language specific, as well as generic understandings are important to this process of using dialogue to enrich and develop programmes. In addition, her thinking on this process of her 'journey' in Phase 1 of the project provides evidence of how the theory and practice of teaching, the 'praxis', are constantly reconsidered, and continually inform each other. This thinking was particularly evident in Nhu's explanation of her need to work with her understandings gained from her academic study to transfer, explore and realise these in the work in her classroom. Though she identified this need as finding 'practical' solutions, she was constantly framing these practical needs in the principles and orientation of intercultural language learning 'theory', demonstrating that the two are inseparable in the planning and teaching process.

Nhu also recognises that developing intercultural planning is an ongoing process, and that she needs to reflect on her work at both short and longer intervals to consider her own and her students' achievements and the extent of their developing understandings of intercultural concepts.

Nhu has agreed to meet with me at the end of the year so a 'long term' perspective' can be considered in relation to this pedagogical stance. This future dialogue can then become the subject of a follow-up paper, and provide further learning opportunities for me and the rest of the team involved in the development of this project.

*\*Nhu Trinh was one of 23 teachers of languages selected from across Australia to participate in Phase 1 of the ILTLP project from August to November 2006. Phase 1 involved commissioned, supported school-based research focussing on long term programming and assessment of the intercultural language teaching and learning. Nhu kindly agreed to have her programming drafts considered in Discussion Papers prepared by the project research team, and to have her thoughts on the feedback process included in this discussion paper.*