

UNLEASH THE FACILITATORS! ENABLE THE COLLABORATORS! WHETHER AND HOW SCHOOL LANGUAGES TEACHERS FACILITATE THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL CAPABILITIES

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Abstract

The world is awash with definitions of intercultural competence which, it might be argued, actually serve to constrain how teachers view their role as Languages educators. Many experienced teachers (this researcher included) sense that there is something more: something more than the ritualistic learning of language as a code reproducible for increasingly standardised tests and tick-box 'competence' and something silenced in learners when that is the main goal; something which actually taps into who their learners are, their lived experiences, and their aspirations; some transformative practice which teachers believe (often based on their own intercultural experiences learning languages) can develop their students from spectators to independent, agile explorers of the wider world who operate agentively in the target language on issues which matter to them – in short, interculturally capable agents. This qualitative research study examines, through iterative inquiry and reflection, whether and how eight secondary school language teachers in one Australian state – Queensland – recognise, elicit and value their students' intercultural capacities. It focusses on their practice; their perceptions of their students and their interculturality; and whether and how they design their teaching to unearth that.

1 Introduction

Much research has been done on the notion of intercultural competence development, one stumbling block for Languages teachers being the plethora of definitions generated. In the context of unprecedented mobility and change, this paper argues that what Languages educators need to focus on is the development of an applied intercultural language capacity called intercultural capability (Liddicoat, 2017) requiring performance, analysis and reflection. What is performed, analysed and reflected upon, and how, is key to this research study, which poses three questions: What understandings, questions and definitions about intercultural language teaching and learning do senior languages teach secondary school languages teachers articulate and why? How do they enact intercultural language teaching and learning? To what extent and how are languages students given agency by teachers in relation to intercultural language use? This paper does not provide findings to the Research Questions, as this is currently being finalised within a higher degree research study. Rather, it scopes out the scholarly literature on intercultural language learning and goes on to outline the methodology by which data are collected, reduced and analysed as the researcher attempts to answer these questions.

1.1 Intercultural language learning: competence or capability?

In a context of globalisation and mobility -what Bauman (2013) termed “liquid modernity” – often espoused building of “intercultural competence” (Byram, 1997) is undermined, largely because of the plethora of definitions which have emerged (Witte and Harden, 2011; Dervin and Gross, 2017). Much of the competence discussion centred on mastering language as a code rather than as a vehicle for meaningful social interaction. In the quest for something more emancipatory, among leading researchers Larsen-Freeman (2012) advocates emphasising process rather than product in language learning, whilst others including Otheguy, Garcia and Reid (2017) and Li (2017) support the use of translanguaging to achieve communicative purposes. Focussing on the learner, da Silva Iddings (2017), advocates recognising learners’ “stores of knowledge” their values and perspectives in developing teaching practice which maintains, mediates and reflects on the connections between language, culture and learning. Scarino (2014) describes the need to grow understanding of this, while Liddicoat (2017) emphasises the central role of the learner in this ideally transformative process.

A second undermining factor is what Kramersch (2012, p. 483) describes as “commodified discourses and self-declared authorities” which emerge as dominant languages and quantitatively-oriented bodies impose themselves. This trend is evident in, for example, the development of a national curriculum in Australia and the growing emphasis on standardised testing with the rising state adherence to the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) system being reflected in Queensland’s curriculum authority having abolished a system of school-based moderated assessment which had operated successfully since the early 1970’s. Praise-worthy aspects of Australia’s national curriculum include the adoption as a General Capability of Intercultural Understanding, premised on three elements – recognising culture and developing respect; reflecting on intercultural experiences and taking responsibility; and interacting and emphasising with others. The Australian Curriculum: Languages Strands explicitly incorporate intercultural reflection and interrogation of language and culture links. However, the centralising and standardising of assessment is of concern in terms of if and how teachers see their role as orchestrators of learning, curriculum designers, classroom practitioners and student enablers. The truly transformative Languages teachers optimally need to develop in students an applied capability to interact reflectively in the target language to do purposeful things which they value in ways which increasing proscription appears to undermine.

1.2 Developing intercultural capability – What? Why? How?

Intercultural language teachers thus need to act agentively themselves to develop capability in students. Scarino (2014) defined intercultural capability as “Learning to communicate successfully, to exchange meaning across languages and cultures and, through reflection, to develop an understanding of the processes involved”, yet this seems to underplay the necessary element of applied performance. According to Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), this entails teachers understanding that teaching from an intercultural perspective frames how teachers understand diversity, their lives within it, and its relationship to their teacher role. Teachers’ and learners’ own experience of linguistic and cultural diversity affect their own teaching and learning practice, individually and across the whole process of teaching and learning. Liddicoat (2017) describes the notion further as “Developing intercultural capability requires integration of performance, analysis and reflection”.

The development of intercultural capability thus entails teacher practice which goes beyond indoctrination to the development of agency. The Capability Approach outlined by Hart, Biggeri, and Babic, B., eds. (2014) actually focusses on youth agency and participation and has much to offer in this area. This combination of agency and capability, the idea of developing intercultural linguistic agency in becoming interculturally capable embraces much of the research from Kramsch (2013), Norton and Toohey (2011), Darwin and Norton (2017) which focussed on notions of language, power and learner investment. The notion that such learner investment triggers initiative is taken up by van Lier (2008) who asserts that an activity that shows initiative clearly indicates agency in action. Similarly, Ahn (2016: 3) states that a person's action to take the initiative in creating a context for his/her learning of the target language and/or culture can thus constitute learner agency. Thus, how a teacher designs opportunities for the development of learner agency, the extent to which that teacher uses intercultural inquiry and mediates meaning with and gives voice to students, encouraging initiative and risk-taking in intercultural language use, are key to this. This is likely to constitute the difference between producing knowledgeable spectators and enabling fully-fledged agentive explorers (Lavie et al, 2018).

2 Methodology

This study was set up to examine the practice of secondary school teachers who teach at Senior language level. The researcher's professional experience having been gained in Queensland, Queensland language practitioners were chosen. Two languages teachers in each school – two teachers of French and six of Japanese overall – were chosen based on their own reputation as expert, highly-experienced practitioners, and on their schools having vigorous language programs with high retention rates. The four schools approached - chosen with a deliberate spread of state, independent and Catholic schools, including three IB Diploma classes and five mainstream Studies Authority ones – all agreed to participate. Year 11 and 12 classes were chosen on the basis that students in those levels had the maturity and language range for interactions enabling meaningful data to be gathered.

Several decisions about methodology needed to be made. Firstly, the focus of the study being classroom practice, this is a qualitative study. Secondly, this research being qualitative, and teachers' voices, lived experiences and reflection – their doings, sayings and relating, and how they shape the student experience then reflect on that – being central, a critical ethnographic approach is apt, since the focus is on 'emergence, on the unexpected, open-ended messiness in fieldwork' (Hopwood, 2017). Always to the fore was the requirement to keep the data-gathering process 'plumb' and ensure that the data is valid, fair and reliable. Thirdly, to ensure that, multiple strategies were employed.

2.1 Data gathering

- Document examination – this involved analysis of school work programs, learning sequences, resources and assessment instruments used. Documents were analysed against a checklist of elements/evidence of planning based on the principles for developing intercultural language learning (Scarino and Liddicoat, 2009:40; Liddicoat and Scarino, 2013)
- Classroom observation – 1 per teacher, orientation to project, class focus/stimulus used, teacher orientation to the learning goals, teacher/student interactions

- Student questionnaire which asked these questions – 1. What is your cultural heritage? 2. What language/s are spoken at home? Please specify by whom. 3. What opportunities do you have to use the language you are studying in this class outside the classroom?
- Teacher questionnaire which asked these questions – 1. What is your cultural heritage? 2. What languages are spoken at home? 3. What are your teacher qualifications? Please specify the institution and year. 4. Why do you believe Languages should be in the school curriculum i.e. what is your language teaching philosophy? (Communicative purposes/CLIL/??) 5. What aspects (of definitions of intercultural language teaching/capability supplied) particularly resonate with you? Can you think of any other elements you would include?
- Videoed class – 1 per teacher, researcher filming aspects of teacher practice, learner response to stimuli, learner risk-taking, teacher/learner and learner/learner interactions, learner reflection
- An audio-recorded stimulated recall - in which, guided by Mishler's view (1991) that the respondents themselves should be granted a more extensive role as participants and collaborators in the research process, the teacher controlled the video replay and commented on his/her teaching choices/habits/strategies used and responded to some standard researcher questions. The questions of the interviewer and the responses of the interviewees are necessary components of an interview, where both parties "collaboratively assemble accounts of experience", then "work together to discern and designate the recognizable and orderly features of the experience under consideration" (Gubrium, 2012, p. 33). The researcher noted that it was more effective to do the stimulated recall the day after the class was videoed to provide time to replay the video and consider particular aspects to probe with the teacher in the stimulated recall.

Following an introductory visit to orientate/distribute consent forms (Principal/Parent and child (of students aged under 18)/teacher participant), and questionnaires (Student and Teacher), a variety of empirical materials that describe 'routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives' (Denzin and Lincoln 2004, p.2) was gathered as outlined above. All interactions in data gathered were transcribed. Then, they were organised loosely according to which of the research questions they related.

2.2 Data reduction

Data is to be reduced using the three research questions initially, then by eliminating repetitive or irrelevant data to define concepts; categorised into thematic groupings; then reorganised into thematic representations of findings, discerning possible super-themes. In order to reduce the data, take meaning from the findings and answer research questions, thematic analysis is being undertaken. Themes are meaningful concepts related to the phenomenon being studied. Thematic codes will be established, informed by the literature, for "qualitative richness of the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 31).

In doing this, inductive reason will be used to accommodate participant-initiated topics not driven by the researcher's questions; and deductive reasoning will be relevant in confirming predictions about how variables are related, given that close examination of data will be meshed with application of theories emerging from prior research in developing analysis.

2.3 Data analysis

Data will be analysed using thematic content analysis and the following flow – data collection, data display, data reduction, drawing conclusions. The need for credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability and the need to develop a personal reflection tool as per Chenail’s (1997) notion of keeping things plumb in order to progressively focus as data is evaluated are key drivers.

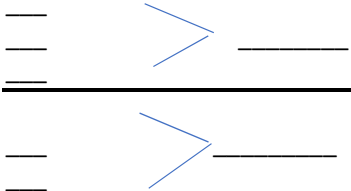
<p>What understandings, questions and definitions about intercultural language teaching and learning do senior languages teachers articulate and why?</p>	
<p>How do they enact intercultural language teaching and learning?</p>	
<p>To what extent and how are languages students given agency by teachers in relation to intercultural language use?</p>	

Fig. 1. Thematic analysis – data reduction, categorisation, reorganisation (Roulston, 2013).

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