Intercultural Language Teaching and Learning: Is it possible to bridge the gap between policy and practice?

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Abstract
In recent years, Australian language-in-education policies have explicitly endorsed an intercultural approach to language teaching and its avowed purpose of developing learners' intercultural competence (MCEETYA, 2005). The most ambitious initiative put forth to achieve this goal in practice has been the Intercultural Language Teaching and Learning Practice (ILTLP) project: (http://www.iltlp.unisa.edu.au/).

This project, commissioned by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) and carried out at national level between 2006 and 2008, set out to provide languages teachers with the tools to develop an "intercultural stance" to their teaching and curriculum development practices. As part of this project, many useful resources, research projects and reports have been produced. Yet, there still is uncertainty about ILTLP's actual realisation in everyday practice (Kholer, 2010, p. 190).

In my presentation, given at the Griffith University-MLTAQ Language Teachers' Forum on 10 August 2011, I explored a number of obstacles standing in the way between policy and practice, which led to a stimulating discussion about the core issues underlying the development of an "intercultural stance" in languages education. This paper provides a summary of the presentation's content, together with relevant points raised during the discussion.

Background to ILTL
On the cusp of this new century, profound changes triggered by emerging processes of globalisation, physical and virtual hypermobilities, as well as instant international communication have increasingly required people to address and, in many cases, to become more sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences. In this context, languages education, as an inherently intercultural activity, has become crucial in exposing learners to a world linguistically and culturally different from their own and, in so doing, equip them to deal with this new reality. In light of these changes and their impact on language and culture pedagogical practices, the Australian federal government commissioned a report on "how to infuse sociocultural understanding into school language programmes" (Kholer, 2010, p. 179).

This report, entitled Report on Intercultural Language Learning (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, & Kholer, 2003), focused on the analysis of curriculum and policy documents in compulsory education. The data were largely collected through Australia-wide school survey
targeted at managers of the languages programs in each state/territory from government
and non-government sectors, as well as teachers, professional associations, and instructors
in the tertiary sector. The ideas and recommendations put forth in the report represented a
turning point in the conceptualisation of language and culture teaching and learning. This
turning point hinged on the dynamic interplay of two basic principles: that every language
and its culture are inseparable and that people are unique, in both how they express their
own culture and how they respond to another culture.

_The National Statement and Plan for Languages Education in Australian Schools 2005-2008_
(MCEETYA, 2005) endorsed this intercultural view of languages education and its newly
avowed purpose of developing intercultural competence:

> Education in a global community brings with it an increasing need to focus on
developing inter-cultural understanding. This involves the integration of language,
culture and learning. Inter-cultural language learning helps learners to know and
understand the world around them, and to understand commonality and difference,
global connections and patterns. Learners will view the world, not from a single
perspective of their own first language and culture, but from the multiple perspectives
gained through the study of second and subsequent language and cultures.
(MCEETYA, 2005, p. 3)

This endorsement at national level developed into the genesis of the Intercultural Language
Teaching and Learning Practice (ILTLP) project (See [http://www.iltlp.unisa.edu.au/](http://www.iltlp.unisa.edu.au/)). This
DEST commissioned project, developed and implemented across all states between 2006
and 2008, set in motion “a fundamental shift in the orientation of language teaching and
learning beyond the communicative approach” (Babel, 2008, p. 2). In so doing, it set out to
provide languages teachers with the tools to develop an “investigative stance” to their
teaching and curriculum development practices, through “talking, interacting, thinking and
questioning” as well as “noticing, documenting, and enacting change within their own
classrooms” (Scarino & Crichton, 2008, p. 4).

The outcomes of the project included a website containing a wide range of professional
learning resources that were generated from the national network of collaboration, which
consisted of 400 participating teachers, educational administrators, and the team of
researchers. These resources comprise detailed ILTLP training modules as well as the
reports from a number of the teacher-participants which include exemplars of good practice
and details of their on-going, reflective, journeys on the way to developing an “investigative
stance”.

The website also includes a 2009 report-in-brief document with details on the aims and
outcomes of the project’s implementation. According to this report, the aims and intended
outcomes of the project were “achieved to an outstanding degree”. The report underscores the large scale and scope of the nationally-networked, collaborative program and highlights amongst its main outcomes: the deep extension of knowledge and understanding of intercultural languages teaching and learning, the acquisition of [teacher participants'] long-term planning and programming skills, changed languages pedagogies and deep reflection on what is taught, how it is taught and assessed and why, teachers feeling re-energised and re-focused about the reasons for teaching languages, increased and significant engagement from students, with increased learning outcomes (RCLCE, 2009, pp. 11-12).

Thinking critically about ILTLP – obstacles to engagement

Despite the landmark significance of this project, the final report’s optimistic outlook on the implementation of ILTLP seemed to be largely limited to the participants involved. In other words, there is still a high level of uncertainty about ILTLP’s actual realisation in everyday practice. This is underpinned by a “lack of clarity” about how the majority of languages teachers in Australia engage with this work; there is still “no comprehensive picture of what is taught, how it is taught and what the outcomes are” (Kholer, 2010, p. 182).

In order to address this lack of clarity, and in so doing, explore avenues to bridge the gap between what is expected at policy level and what is actually being enacted in everyday practices, I argue that there are a number of underlying “obstacles” standing in the way of languages teachers being able to engage with ILTLP in the first place. An overview of these obstacles, which can be grouped into pedagogical and organisational, is presented in the next few paragraphs.

Amongst the pedagogical obstacles, or challenges, the first one refers to ILTLP being underpinned by a shift in teachers’ stance in relation to language and culture teaching and learning and their development of an “investigative orientation” towards their own practices (Kholer, 2010, p.182). This is not an obstacle in itself. On the contrary, developing an “investigative orientation” towards one’s own teaching practices is a highly desirable goal (Sercu, 2006). However, it is not a particularly new conceptualisation of educational practices, and it is certainly not one limited to intercultural aspects of teaching. Developing an “investigative orientation” is at the core of reflective practices and action research cycles of inquiry which have been an integral part of the philosophy of language teachers’ education (cf. Nunan & Richards, 1990; Wallace, 1991, 2000). While aiming to have an “integrative” view on this investigative orientation (Crichton, 2008), these ideas are largely hinged on a critical approach to one’s practices and convictions, as well as beliefs about
language and culture. Such a critical approach, however, continues to remain mere rhetoric (Norris, 2010), rather than a reality.

At the core of this mindset, we find an additional challenge. This is concerned with theoretical aspects that remain unexplored, for instance, the lack of clear understanding of the language and culture nexus. Claims of language and culture's 'indivisibility' of, or 'isomorphic relationship' have become a cliche in languages education, leading to expressions like "language and culture are inseparable" (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993a, 1999; Pulvermessen, 2000), "language and culture are inextricably linked" (Lange & Paige, 2003; Tang, 1999) or the most frequent "language is culture and culture is language" (Wright, 1996). Yet, as Fantini pointed out a decade ago, although most language educators acknowledge that "language and culture are interrelated,... they often lack explicit understanding of this interrelationship" (Fantini, 1991, p. 115). The widespread but oversimplified description of the relationship between language and culture as 'inextricable' is highly problematic and despite a shift in teachers' approaches to investigating their own practices, this description and its associated assumptions continue to be part of the collective subconscious in languages education, not only for teachers, but also for learners.

In an educational context where the acquisition of linguistic competence prevails, the incorporation of cultural aspects continues to remain ad hoc and incidental. There is thus a need in languages education for a conceptualisation of the relationship between language and culture that addresses key issues in helping language learners to become effective intercultural communicators, one that takes into account different levels of language proficiency and practical constraints such as time and resources. In other words, such conceptualisation should help learners to explore critically instances in which success or breakdown in communication may be caused by the ways in which 'culture' is manifest through language in native and non-native communicative encounters.

A direct corollary of this issue is the lack of clear conceptualisation of 'intercultural competence'. According to Sercu (2002), language teachers lack a consistent working definition of this term and an understanding of its implications for their teaching practices. The use of the term 'competence' is perhaps one of the most hindering aspects of this notion. Its positivist connotations lead to inconsistent assumptions regarding its articulation and operationalisation in practice (Scarino, 2009). In terms of curriculum planning, this leads to several contentious issues; amongst them, the most contentious being: assessment. This dimension of the curriculum has received a lot of attention due to its pivotal role in providing evidence that learners have indeed, met the requirements of a given instructional objective -
in this case, the development of 'intercultural competence'. Yet, assessment remains one of the most difficult areas for teachers to address (Sercu, 2010).

The problematic nature of assessing the development of 'intercultural competence' seems to stem from positivist traditions underpinned by the need to quantify learners' performance. In this context, formative assessment tasks that promote students' self-reflection have emerged as a suitable alternative to help teachers and learners monitor their awareness-raising process. Formative assessment tasks may include written portfolios, oral presentations, reports on group discussions, peer-review and so forth (cf. Suomela-Salmi, 2010). However, these tasks are not without caveats. These caveats are underpinned by one main underlying assumption: that teachers are adequately prepared or trained to help students increase their levels of 'interculturality'. Even when conceiving this task as the development of 'critical skills', there are no frameworks to scaffold teaching practices or the ethical issues involved in evaluating learners' reflections. Thus, even within this new vision for assessing intercultural competence, issues of validity, interpretation and objectivity remain unresolved. There are still no available instruments to assess this dimension in a holistic fashion, nor are there instruments to document, monitor or determine its acquisitional development (Sercu, 2010).

From an organisational perspective, there are also several issues that need to be addressed, amongst these the most salient being the lack of connection between the training of pre-service teachers at university level. This training entails a two-pronged process. On the one hand, the inclusion of modules that address ILTL's practices and the development of an "investigative stance" throughout their pre-service education. On the other hand, and perhaps one of the most difficult challenges, concerns pre-service student-teachers being taught by university language teachers who are mostly unfamiliar with current trends in the ILTLP and other language-in-education policies being promoted nation-wide. I argue that this lack of articulation between what is expected once languages teachers begin their practice and what is provided to them during their training is one of the major obstacles that remain to be addressed in order to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

**Concluding remarks: Bridging the gap or falling in the precipice?**

It is clear from this brief review of the ILTLP state of play that further research is required to understand language teachers' enactment of intercultural teaching practices. However, it is also clear that such research needs to start by acknowledging the pedagogical and organisational obstacles still standing in its way.
Against this backdrop, it is evident that languages teachers face trying challenges, they find themselves at a crossroads in terms of reconceptualising their role and teaching practices as well as specific curricular content and objectives within this new educational landscape. Undoubtedly, in the globalised world in which we live, the appeal of ILTLP as a suitable orientation for languages education has led to its widespread acceptance. While the development of an intercultural, investigative stance is a highly desirable goal in languages education, in practice this shift has resulted largely in theorists and policy makers effectively superimposing the development of ‘intercultural competence’ onto an ill-prepared field whose inherent focus has historically been linguistic. Curricular and teaching practices are still largely based on the development of linguistic competence, and so are teachers’ and learners’ expectations of classroom work. These discrepancies seem to be exacerbated further by the complex structural and logistical features of the educational system, and, ultimately, by the imperfect nature of the languages classroom. This is an inconvenient truth that theorists and practitioners need to acknowledge in order to come to terms with the nub of these issues and move forward to promote sustainable curriculum innovation, particularly, in light of changes to come with the development of the new national curriculum.

References and relevant sources:


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