Intercultural competence through language education in Australian higher education: Mission (im)possible?

Abstract

Language learning is now widely conceived as having to meet the ‘twin goals’ of language proficiency and intercultural competence. This interculturally-aware vision for language learners is particularly evident in Australian university policy statements and their descriptions of graduate attributes. However, for the most part, the inherent structural features of university language programs and the overall organisational philosophy of Australian universities fail to reflect a commitment to this widened educational mission. In this study I analyse these structural and organisational features through examination of three sources: (a) government-commissioned reports; (b) academic publications and (c) news items concerning the critical state of languages education in the Australian higher education sector. I articulate the plethora of challenging, inherent limitations reported in these sources, all of which point to the absence of correlation between espoused goals and actual graduate outcomes. I then use the articulation of these limitations as a platform to question the feasibility of these ‘twin goals’ as they are currently conceived and realised in practice.
The twin goals and the Australian higher education context

Australian universities have been increasingly concerned with preparing graduates for an ever more globalised academic and employment market. Currently, most university policy statements make explicit reference to the development of specific graduate attributes such as ‘global citizenship’ (Barrie 2006), and various related descriptors such as ‘intercultural understanding’ and ‘sensitivity to other cultures’ (Bosanquet 2010). In this context, languages education, as an inherently intercultural activity, has been called upon to help equip learners with the development of such attributes. Language learning is thus now widely conceived as having to meet the twin goals of language proficiency and intercultural competence. This conceptualisation of language and culture learning is evident in Australian language-in-education policies at primary, secondary and tertiary education levels. These policies have ostensibly endorsed an inter-cultural approach to language teaching with a view to 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 pattern. (MCEETYA 2005: 3)

Yet, language teachers in Australian universities face trying challenges. Not least of which is the dwindling number of languages offered at university level. This declining trend has been substantiated by the 2007 Languages in Crisis discussion paper presented by the Group of Eight (Go8), Australia’s leading universities. This document revealed that in the ten years leading to 2007, the overall number of languages offered at Australian universities was reduced by more than fifty percent, ‘at a time when monolingual native English speakers are losing their linguistic advantages and are increasingly competing with multilingual graduates from around the world’ (Go8 2007: 1).

Given Australia’s multilingual potential, this pattern of decline and erosion in the provision of languages education at university has been described as not only a national tragedy, but also an ‘international embarrassment’ (Clyne, Pauwels and Sussex 2007). Paradoxically, in the face of this declining trend, the 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education (DEEWR 2008) further highlighted the importance of languages education in the context of the internationalisation of universities and the development of interculturally competent graduates:

There is growing demand from employers for tertiary qualifications with a strong international component – both from the perspective of the curriculum content and through exposure to different cultures to develop intercultural and language skills and competencies. [...] Knowledge of other cultures and their languages is an essential life skill for future graduates if they are to engage effectively in global professional practice. (DEEWR 2008: 104)
Here lies the paradox; language education is in crisis, yet according to education policies and university policy statements, languages are reported to be of ever-increasing relevance in preparing interculturally competent students for the globalised world in which we live. Moreover, despite these espoused goals, policy documents do not offer any guidelines, or, at the very least, scaffolding strategies, to help teachers achieve these goals in practice. In other words, top-down directives are provided but it is up to the academics themselves to tackle this matter from the bottom-up.

Several steps have been taken in this direction. The first steps have focused on gaining a better understanding of the state of play of language studies and their provision: the structure of degree offerings, main features of language programs and subjects, etc. Several government-commissioned reports have addressed this matter (Hajek, Slaughter and Stevens 2008; Nettelbeck et al. 2007; White and Baldauf 2006; Winter 2009). These reports echoed and expanded on numerous scholarly publications concerning the critical state of languages education in Australian higher education (Briguglio 2004, 2006; Clyne 2005; Clyne et al. 2007; Go8 2007; Pauwels 2002, 2007, Pitman and Broomhall 2009; to name a few). News coverage has provided additional impetus to raise the level of awareness on this matter and further expose this challenging situation (Lane 2009a, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a; 2011b, inter alia). Overall, these sources provide compelling evidence as to the many obstacles and constraints to ensuring the sustainable availability of languages in higher education. In this contribution I endeavour to articulate these obstacles and constraints to reveal a deep-seated lack of coherence between education and institutional policies and the goals they ostensibly uphold, particularly, in relation to advancing the development of intercultural competence. Here, it is important to clarify that intercultural competence can be, and is indeed, fostered in other disciplines beyond languages education. However, the scope of this paper is the exploration of this goal as it relates to language learning in the higher education context.

Facing deep-seated internal impediments

The sources examined provide evidence to suggest that the main impediments to meeting the dual goal of linguistic proficiency and intercultural competence come from within. That is, that the overall organisational philosophy of Australian universities and the inherent structural features of university language programs and their provision represent obstacles to achieving the very mission and objectives they set for themselves. I start by considering these last vis-à-vis graduate attributes espoused by Australian universities, and I then move on to examine the support, or lack thereof, provided by the inherent structural features of language programs and their curricula.

As mentioned in earlier paragraphs, most Australian universities’ policy statements now include among their graduate attributes various descriptors of ‘(inter)cultural competence’. The most relevant to language and culture learning
is that of ‘global citizenship’, an ‘attitude or stance towards the world’ which students are meant to develop during their studies (cf. Barrie 2006; ITL 2012; Pitman and Broomhall 2009). Institutions use this and a plethora of related concepts including: intercultural awareness, cross-cultural competence, inclusivity, diversity, globalisation, sustainability, leadership, multiculturalism (Bosanquet 2010) to address the imperative of developing graduates’ ‘intercultural engagement, communication and understanding’ for future participation in society (Council for the Australian Federation 2007:17). This espoused vision does not, however, imply a high level of institutional commitment and support for languages education. This is surprising given the increasing imperative to rationalise and substantiate the quality of Australian universities’ graduate outcomes. This was monitored by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), an independent, not-for-profit national agency that promotes, audits, and reports on quality assurance in Australian higher education; and from 2011, is now monitored by the Australian government’s newly established national regulatory and quality agency: the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA).

However, thus far, AUQA efforts have focused solely on examining universities’ examples of good practice in the context of English language education for international students. The AUQA report on Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities, funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), acknowledged that ‘there is also an increased recognition within universities of the fundamental nature of language in learning and academic achievement for all students’ (AUQA 2009: 2). This recognition is set against the background of universities’ internationalisation processes, which are largely aimed to foster ‘better understandings about other people and cultures, and competence in foreign languages’ (Harman 2005: 120).

Yet, significant quality assurance efforts continue to be focused on the development of English language proficiency of full fee-paying overseas students, thus prioritising target groups that are of direct economic relevance to many universities. Two points can be made here. First, this is not the reality of all universities in Australia, particularly, those that have strong, healthy language departments. However, it is certainly true for many institutions whose language programs have modest enrolments and are therefore seen as a financial deficit. Second, while the development of English language proficiency is indeed a significant imperative, both ethically and financially speaking (Lane 2011c), it is also a clear indication of the narrow, one-dimensional conceptualisation of internationalisation processes largely held not only by many institutions, but also by the national government (Crichton and Scarino 2007; Trevaskes, Eisenchlas and Liddicoat 2003).

In addition to the lack of regulation of all graduates’ outcomes in terms of linguistic proficiency and intercultural competence, there is also an absence of overarching policies to regulate the structure and provision of languages education in
the Australian higher education sector. This is partly explained by the establishment of universities as highly autonomous bodies. However, given the current national imperative to rationalise learning outcomes and standards, this absence has the potential to widen the gap between graduates’ achievements in terms of language and culture goals and the ways in which they are rationalised and substantiated in practice.

Despite lack of regulation, a cursory examination of language departments across the nation reveals that most language programs share fundamental structural design features and thus face similar challenges in their endeavour to meet the twin goals of language proficiency and intercultural competence. The typical structure of a language program of studies is that of a major: a three-year (or six-semester) sequence of subjects ranging from ab initio to advanced levels of language proficiency. Language units average 52 direct contact hours per semester for European languages and 65 for Asian languages, albeit some variations across institutions (Nettelbeck et al. 2007; White and Baldauf 2006).

The current three-year program structure, however, is shaped by increasingly marked features. Recent research in the form of surveys and government commissioned reports (cf. Clyne et al. 2007; Fotheringham 2009; Go8 2007; Hajek et al. 2008; Nettelbeck et al. 2007; Pauwels 2002; White and Baldauf 2006; Winter 2009) suggests that university language programs have a growing bottom-heavy structure, that is, a pyramid-like shape in terms of enrolments, with a high number of enrolments in elementary, first year subjects and a high attrition rate in the advanced, third year subjects. This trend in enrolments is aggravated by what former University of Western Australia Arts Dean Anne Pauwels has labelled a ‘new breed’ of non-specialist language learners: ‘language tasters’ (Pauwels cited in Lane 2010b). According to Pauwels, this new learner profile is characterised by students interested in having a ‘taste’ of the target language rather than undertaking its study as a three-year major. This type of learner generally takes up the target language as an additional subject or an elective within a professional degree, completing only a semester or, at most, a year of language study. Many of these students decide to continue despite their original intentions, thus exceeding the standard three-year degree program. However, for the most part, ‘language tasters’ add to an already bottom-heavy, pyramid-like enrolment structure.

The overall structural design features of university language programs are further weakened when one considers that fewer than 10% of first-year university students undertake language studies of any kind, and fewer than 25% of these students actually complete a three year language program (Lane 2009b; Nettelbeck et al. 2007). This means that ‘fewer than 5% of students exit university with at least a minor study in a language other than English’ (Lo Bianco and Slaughter 2009: 56). This figure refers to the study of languages over the typical three-year undergraduate degree program and does not include study abroad or exchange components. Nonetheless, it is a clear indication that a very low percentage of Australian graduates
develops an intermediate to advanced level of proficiency in a language other than English (Pauwels 2002). Considering that languages education is regarded, at least, on paper, as an integral factor in the development of interculturally competent graduates, these are clearly alarming figures.

Going beyond the language program level, there are additional challenges posed by competing forces within universities which further question the feasibility of meeting the twin goals of language proficiency and intercultural competence. Except for those degrees specialising in linguistics or applied linguistics, most undergraduate degree programs do not consider language studies compulsory. As Martín indicates, ‘none of the 38 doctorate-granting Australian universities has compulsory language study requirements (compared with 90% of similar institutions in the United States)’ (Martín 2005: 54). While most faculties, other than those in which languages are taught, allow students to enrol in language studies as elective subjects (Nettelbeck et al. 2007), the structure of their degree programs largely restricts the number subjects that may be completed as such. In fact, in most degree programs, this number is ‘usually limited to one year of instruction, which is sufficient for no more than a superficial introduction to the foreign language’ (Eisenchlas, Trevaskes, and Liddicoat, 2003:145). In the last few years, many institutions have attempted to alleviate this issue by allowing the concurrent enrolment in a Diploma of Languages and by creating combined degrees with language study as a formal co-requisite. These degrees include international business degrees, political science and international relations, education (B.Ed., Dip.Ed.) and other communications degrees majoring in journalism and public relations (Nettelbeck et al. 2007). However, these combined requirements effectively extend the standard three year period of undergraduate studies to a four or five year period and do not necessarily allow for completion of the three-year sequence of specialist language studies.

When considering strategies for ensuring the maintenance of language study in the higher education sector, Pauwels (2007) has argued for the exploration of incentive schemes to study languages. Some universities have already implemented such initiatives, for instance offering additional points on students’ entry scores if they successfully completed the study of a language other than English to the end of Year 12. These initiatives have the potential to strengthen the structure of language programs by increasing enrolment numbers in intermediate and advanced levels, thereby reshaping their pyramid-like features. However, in order to ensure their efficacy, they should be coherently implemented nationwide.

Alternative initiatives to ensure the national availability of languages education have also emerged at cross-institutional level. According to White and Baldauf (2006), ‘more than half Australian universities are involved in some sort of collaborative arrangement, and these range from a “one to one” type of arrangement to consortia with a number of [domestic and/or international] partners’ (White and Baldauf 2006: 21). These types of collaborative initiatives have been strategically promoted as mutually satisfactory arrangements for all partners involved. Although in some cases
these collaborations have provided an alternative to the closure of low-enrolment language programs (cf. Lane 2011a), in other cases, they have actually resulted in the closure of language programs and even of whole language departments (cf. Fotheringham 2009). Moreover, many underlying, contentious aspects of their ‘collaborative’ nature remain unresolved. The most pressing of these is the lack of clarity on how financial arrangements are established and administered, particularly in terms of student enrolments or Equivalent Full-Time Student Load (EFTSL) per subject and the provision of teaching resources (Hajek et al. 2008). As Lo Bianco and Slaughter (2009: 56) indicate ‘some of these schemes are failing under budget pressures, with single-institution financial imperatives overriding the collaborative rationale’. In addition, other structural and logistical problems include differences between collaborating institutions in their enrolment procedures (for both domestic and international students), credit point systems and assessment procedures; difficulties with timetable alignment; and largely, poor support from partner institutions (White and Baldauf 2006: 18-26; Winter 2009). Overall, despite their seemingly positive effect on language offerings, these initiatives add to the complex landscape of curriculum development and implementation thus further reducing the potential for developing an integrated language and culture learning agenda.

Looking for answers within the curriculum

Apart from the complexities and overall critical state of language studies provision at Australian universities, when we consider the actual place of the ‘(inter)cultural’ dimension within the curricula of language programs, additional obstacles start to emerge. A cursory examination of language programs descriptions and subject outlines reveals at least three common trends to integrating an ‘(inter)-cultural dimension’. Here, it is important to clarify that these trends are indicative; they do not represent the realities of all institutions and language departments. Nonetheless, they offer concrete snapshots of the current status quo.

At one end of the continuum, the most traditional strategy to integrate an (inter) cultural dimension has been the integration of language ‘content subjects’ dedicated to the study of specific areas such as literature, film and other ‘cultural traditions’ through the target language. These subjects require intermediate to advanced levels of language proficiency, which makes them accessible only to specialist learners, mostly students who are enrolled in the more advanced subjects of these programs. Given the bottom-heavy structure of most language programs, and the high attrition rate in these advanced subjects, only a low percentage of language students benefit from this strategy.

In addition, those students who are able to enrol in these advanced subjects, most likely in the last year, or last semester of studies, are thus exposed to a relatively limited view of language and culture learning. The syllabi of these subjects reveal that their approach to the study of ‘culture’ may be limited to the acquisition of what
Crichton and Scarino (2007) describe as the content approach to “the intercultural”, that is: “a body of knowledge to be analysed and acquired by the learner”, that is, representations of ‘culture’ textualised as, “issues”, “case studies”, “examples”, “values perspectives”, and “aspects”, and “practices”, which students are required to “analyse”, “explore”, “compare”, “consider”, and “examine”. The content approach is evident in the type and focus of assessment items. Students are generally assessed on their knowledge of the subject matter (literature, film and so forth) and more specifically, on their development of the four macro-linguistic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing).

At the other end of the continuum, we find the second type of strategy which focuses on non-language subject components. In addition to the core language subject components, language programs generally include so-called ‘cultural context’ subjects. These subjects are typically offered at beginners’ level and are taught in English, which means that they are also available to miscellaneous students across faculties. These subjects offer a general introduction to a potpourri of themes and ‘cultural’ aspects (e.g. historical and political developments as well as literary, film and other salient representations) of the country or countries where the target language is spoken. However, this strategy isolates culture from language and is also largely underpinned by a ‘content’ approach to the integration of the (inter)cultural dimension. In both cases we see two extreme versions of the acquisition of ‘(inter) cultural’ knowledge. They each target completely different learner profiles and provide no clear indication of how they connect with other subjects to work towards a coherent, sequential, development of linguistic proficiency and intercultural competence.

The third strategy to address the ‘(inter)cultural’ dimension is the incorporation an overseas exchange component. Most Australian universities have formal exchange agreements with universities around the world. As such, they offer students the opportunity to go on exchange and provide various types of financial assistance to support their studies (Daly and Barker 2010). Language programs generally encourage students at intermediate and advanced levels to take advantage of these schemes. While the opportunity to pursue language studies abroad is generally identified as a motivating factor for students learning languages, in practice, the number of students who take advantage of this opportunity is comparatively low (Nettelbeck et al. 2007). Indeed, according to the 2007 report Outgoing international mobility of Australian university students (Olsen 2007), only 5.8% of undergraduate student had an ‘overseas study experience’ (this included student exchange programs; semester or year-long programs; cultural tours and language study visits; and internships). Thus, despite universities’ claims regarding overseas studies as an integral component of their commitment to the internationalisation process and the development of ‘global citizens’, their impact in this regard seems negligible.

In addition, research suggests that periods of sojourn abroad do not automatically guarantee the development of intercultural competencies (cf. Shaules
2007). Indeed, according to Crichton and Scarino, the development of intercultural competence through this type of strategy is largely regarded ‘as a matter of moving between culturally defined locations’ (2007: 4.9). They argue that limiting the integration of an ‘(inter)cultural’ dimension to this type of relocation approach, confines students’ experiences to ‘a matter of co-presence’ with diversity. This type of strategy, therefore, does not guarantee participating students’ deliberate and active engagement in reflective processes about their own identity in relation to others, or on the reciprocal nature of interaction between languages and cultures, key aspects to the dual development of linguistic proficiency and intercultural competence (Crichton and Scarino 2007).

At subject-level, most outlines, particularly in elementary subjects, include broad ‘(inter)cultural’ learning objectives that appear to address university requirements in a sort of ‘tick the box’ manner. In addition to development of the four macro-skills, learning objectives typically refer to the acquisition of ‘cultural knowledge’ and ‘awareness of differences and similarities with the target culture’. Yet course syllabi fail to indicate how these objectives are addressed in terms of content, or how their achievement is evaluated or monitored in terms of assessment. This does not mean that language teachers do not address these objectives in everyday practice, but it does suggest that cultural goals may be addressed in an ad hoc manner and that they are subordinated to linguistic goals in formal assessment (Piasecka 2011).

Balancing the status quo

The academic literature reveals that numerous studies have attempted to address the dual development of language proficiency and intercultural competence in Australian university language programs. From the design of specific subjects to modules within subjects, from syllabus selection to development of specific assessment items (Eisenchlas and Hortiguera 1999; Eisenchlas and Trevaskes 2003; Eisenchlas and Trevaskes 2007; Liddicoat and Crozet 2001; Mrowa-Hopkins and Strambi 2005; Visocnik Murray and Laura 2001, to name a few), these studies provide ample evidence of good practice toward the integration of an intercultural dimension in university language programs. More notably, a study by Crichton et al. (2004) offers a useful set of integrated resources for intercultural teaching and learning across several disciplines. These resources are set against internationalisation processes in Australian higher education and provide exemplars from one institution in particular.

For the most part, however, the parameters of these studies are relatively narrow and focus on isolated instances of innovation, which may not be easily replicable across languages or proficiency levels. That is, these studies focus on specific languages and levels of proficiency and concern specific teaching contexts that do not provide language educators with an overall, clear conceptualisation of how language and culture learning goals can be coherently linked, and incrementally developed throughout a program of studies.
Here, it is important to clarify that there is no ‘one-size fits all’ solution to integrating the dual development of linguistic proficiency and intercultural competence. However, three points can be made. First, as described earlier, university language programs around the country share enough structural features to support the development of shared practices and coherent strategies to address this goal. Second, given the nation-wide imperative to rationalise universities’ graduate outcomes, it is a particularly propitious moment to draw and expand on instances of good practice to formulate explicit goals and learning objectives that account for the pedagogical realities in university language classrooms. Third, in the face of national curriculum changes underway (ACARA 2011), it is important to ensure articulation and continuity of pedagogical principles underlying compulsory and tertiary level languages education. After all, amongst our language learners there are future language teachers who, upon graduation, are expected to foster intercultural language learning principles (Scarino and Crichton 2008) in their own practices.

Conclusion

In this contribution I have examined the pervasive lack of coherence between Australian universities’ espoused goals in relation to language and culture learning and their realisation in practice. This lack of coherence seems to be underpinned by two contradictory forces. On the one hand, we have government and university policy documents rhetoric of commitment to the development of interculturally sensitive graduates alongside the internationalisation of degree programs. In this rhetoric, languages education is regarded as an integral component of both the internationalisation process and the development of intercultural competencies. On the other hand, we have the reality of language programs, their inherent structural features and their unrelenting erosion, all of which reveal a complete absence of correlation between these espoused goals and actual graduate outcomes. While steps have been taken to narrow the seemingly unbridgeable gap between policy and practice, these steps require additional impetus to identify feasible shared practices and coherent strategies to realise these goals.

As such, my critique does not seek to imply that the development of interculturally competent graduates should be discarded as a goal for languages education. Nor does it imply that attempts to foster the dual development of language proficiency and intercultural competence should be forsaken. On the contrary, it points to the need for government and university policymakers as well as language educators to re-visit these goals to account for the pedagogic realities discussed above. Re-examination of these goals is integral to the formulation of coherent, feasible learning objectives and the overall achievement of an ‘intercultural’ vision for the future of Australian university graduates, a vision that adequately integrates the dual goal of linguistic proficiency and intercultural competence.
Notes

1. In this contribution, a ‘subject’ refers to a set of learning activities (including lectures, tutorials and workshops) underpinned by a coherent syllabus. This terminology may vary depending on the institution, for instance, many universities use the term ‘unit’ rather than ‘subject’.

References


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