Intercultural understanding and professional learning through critical engagement

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural understanding is one of the seven General Capabilities identified by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority in the national curricular development currently underway. Conceiving languages education as ‘an endeavour focused on the development of intercultural understanding’ (Liddicoat & Kohler, 2012, p. 73) requires teachers to identify and challenge their own beliefs and conceptualisations of the nature of their task as educators. This paper presents the outcomes of a small-scale professional development program designed to help languages teachers engage with this re-envisioned task. The program aimed to provide an opportunity for teachers – in primary and secondary language classrooms – to critically explore the links between language and culture and how these can be translated into classroom practices to foster learners’ intercultural understanding within an action research methodological framework. This paper examines the data-driven insights yielded by this program, in particular, examples of good practice as well as teachers’ personal reflections, and considers them in relation to the field of languages education and teachers’ professional learning. In addition, the paper identifies emerging implications for current policies supporting the development of intercultural understanding.

Key Words

intercultural understanding, intercultural language learning, professional learning, action research, Australian Curriculum General Capabilities

INTRODUCTION

Despite the increasingly established recognition that a language cannot be successfully learned without developing an understanding of the culture(s) embodied in and manifested through that language (Byram, 1997; Byram & Zarate, 1994; Liddicoat & Crozet, 2000), explicit, active enactment of such an understanding through development of deliberate teaching practices remains to be explored beyond the level of passive recognition (Liddicoat & Scarno, 2013). This paper starts by exploring the current state of this matter in the Australian context and, in so doing, provides the backdrop for a professional development program, conducted by the author, entitled Demystifying the language and culture nexus – applications for the classroom. The project was designed and implemented with funding provided by the Association of Independent Schools of Queensland (ISQ), and was intended to assist teachers of languages to critically engage with the development of interculturally-oriented practices. Data collected from classroom observations, teachers’ interviews and evaluation of the program, and teachers’ final reports provide insightful information about the various challenges languages teachers are facing as they engage with a re-envisioned teaching endeavour focused on the development of intercultural understanding.

INTERCULTURAL LANGUAGE LEARNING – THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

Over the last few decades, the field of languages education has taken several steps to explicitly address the role of culture in curriculum development and teaching practices. In the Australian context, the most significant step taken to this end has been the introduction of an intercultural orientation to language learning and teaching (see Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarno, & Kohler, 2003; Scarno, Liddicoat, Carr, Crichton, Crozet, Delfit, Kohler, Loechel, Mercurio, Morgan, Papademetre, & Scrimgeour, 2007; Scarno & Crichton, 2008, for example). Explicit endorsement of this orientation at policy level was evident in the National Statement and Plan for Languages Education in Australian Schools 2005-2008 (MCEETYA, 2005), and in the national statement on education in Australia which emphasises the need to develop students’ ability ‘to relate our own values and traditions to the experience of others’ and, in so doing, to promote the development of skills such as ‘intercultural engagement, communication and understanding’ for future participation in society (Council for the Australian Federation, 2007, p. 17). The landmark significance of these shifts in pedagogical perspective and policy focus have been supported by the development of several national programs to help teachers realise them in practice – most notably, the Intercultural Language Teaching and Learning in Practice (ILTLP) Project 2006-2008 (Research Centre for Languages and Cultures Education [RCLCE], University of South Australia, 2008), open to teachers of languages Australia-wide, and the Professional Standards Project for Languages: Professional Learning Program (Scarno, Liddicoat, Crichton, Cumow, Kohler, Loechel, Morgan & Scrimgeour, 2008).

In addition to these initiatives, a number of classroom-based investigations have provided evidence of specific pedagogical responses illustrating what intercultural language learning may look like in practice (see Colman & Davidson, 2008; Moloney, 2008; Morgan, 2008a; 2010; Morgan & Mercurio, 2010; Takimoto & Hashimoto, 2010, for example).

Nevertheless, despite the concerted, deliberate efforts outlined above, there is still a high level of uncertainty about the actual realisation of an intercultural orientation in everyday practice, across languages and levels of proficiency (Díaz, 2011). Kohler (2010) highlights that this uncertainty is underpinned by a ‘lack of clarity’ about how the majority of languages teachers in Australia engages with this work; as a result, there is still ‘no comprehensive picture of what is taught, how it is taught and what the outcomes are’ (p. 182). In the midst of this uncertainty, languages teachers are now required to take intercultural language learning a step further to explicitly integrate the development of intercultural understanding in their classrooms. Indeed, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), in developing the Australian Curriculum, has included intercultural understanding amongst the seven General Capabilities, which are literacy, numeracy, information and communication technology capability, critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, ethical behaviour and intercultural understanding (ACARA, 2011).

It is important in initiating this discussion, however, to distinguish among a number of interrelated concepts that are quite distinct from one another. Firstly, there is the distinction between a ‘cultural’ and an ‘intercultural’ perspective in languages education. While the former ‘emphasises the culture of the other and leaves that culture of itself’ (Scarino, Liddicoat, Crichton, Curnow, Kohler, Loechel, Mercurio, Morgan, Papademetre, & Scrimgeour, 2010, p. 9), the latter ‘emphasises the learners’ own cultures as a fundamental part of engaging with a new culture’ (Liddicoat, 2005, cited in Liddicoat & Scarno, 2013, p. 29, emphases added). The second distinction can be drawn between intercultural language learning and intercultural understanding, particularly as it is conceived in ACARA documentation. Intercultural language learning is underpinned by an intercultural orientation to language learning and has been undergoing development and theorisation in the Australian languages education context for a number of years (Liddicoat & Scarno, 2010; Kohler, 2010). On the other hand, ACARA conceives of intercultural understanding as ‘a relatively recent addition to Australian school curricula’, a more encompassing
an ‘investigative stance’ for professional learning (Scarino, Crichton, Heugh, & Liddicoat, 2012), in-service language teachers require support and structured scaffolding in order to engage in these tasks. Therefore, despite the intercultural rhetoric supported at theory and policy level, challenging experienced teachers’ own beliefs and assumptions about the place of culture and, more importantly, ‘the intercultural’ in language teaching remains at the crux of realising this vision in practice.

A BOTTOM-UP APPROACH TO PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

As Flamini and Jiménez Raya (2007, p. 105) point out, research has shown that top-down professional development has been largely ineffective in bringing about substantial, sustainable change in classroom practice (Fullan, 1982; Leithwood, Begley, & Cousins, 1994). A bottom-up approach that incorporates collaborative teacher-researcher inquiry is more likely to result in relevant, long-lasting improvement in teaching practices. In light of this perspective, a small-scale professional development program was designed to address two complementary imperatives: firstly, critical exploration of in-service teachers’ assumptions about the principles underpinning the development of interculturally-oriented teaching practices and intercultural understanding; and secondly, exploration of possible avenues to bridge the gap between what is expected at policy level and what is feasible in practice within specific educational contexts. For research purposes, these imperatives were galvanised into two guiding research questions:

1. What are the current challenges faced by in-service teachers as they endeavour to engage with interculturally-oriented teaching practices and the development of learners’ intercultural understanding?
2. To what extent can bottom-up action research-driven professional development initiatives such as this project help promote the implementation of interculturally-oriented curriculum innovation and teachers’ professional learning?

The professional development program consisted of:

1. Three all-day, face-to-face workshops spread throughout the 2012 teaching year
2. Planning, designing and implementing a small-scale action research project during Terms 2 and 3, 2012.

The content of workshops aimed to problematise participating teachers’ own practices with a view to promoting innovation through critical engagement. The small-scale project was based on focusing on a topic/linguistic aspect to be explored, integrating activities aimed at fostering intercultural understanding.

The program and its methodology were intended to give teacher-participants the opportunity to engage in innovation through a scaffolded cycle of inquiry within the context of their own courses while further shaping their professional learning paths. The critical-reflective nature of this methodology sought to act as a catalyst of ‘change’. In this investigation, ‘change’ was expected to occur gradually and incrementally from ongoing contesting and problematising the teacher-participants’ approaches to language and culture teaching in light of the explicit articulation of key concepts underpinning interculturally-oriented language teaching practices (e.g. intercultural teaching approaches and resources, intercultural understanding as a framework for the development of learning objectives and assessment practices, etc.). The interpretative nature of action research allowed the process of inquiry to lead to devising solutions based on the views and interpretations of the participants involved in the investigation within their own educational contexts, rather than solutions underpinned by top-down prescriptive statements. Finally, the cyclical, iterative nature of action research meant that teachers could engage in an ongoing cycle of critical action and reflection on topics/areas of interest to them, and within their own contextual needs, therefore empowering them to become the architects of their own professional learning process (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998; Zuber-Skerritt, 1992).

The use of action research was consistent with the articulation of an ‘investigative stance’ promoted in the Professional Standards for Accomplished Teaching of Languages and Cultures (AFMLTA, 2005) and in the Professional Standards Project (AFMLTA, 2008). In this context, an investigative stance is not conceived as an ‘add on’ to language teaching practices, rather, it is conceived as an integrative orientation toward innovation and ongoing professional learning (Crichton, 2008). Such a stance entails, on the one hand, developing a critical approach to one’s beliefs – in this case, about language and culture and the nature of language teaching – as well as reflection on enacted practices; and on the other hand, systematically noticing and documenting evidence of change (Larrivee, 2000, 2008a, 2008b). Evidentiary documents ranged from lesson plans and learning activities, classroom observation notes, video or audio recordings of lessons, examples of students’ classroom work and feedback, to students’ evaluations and/or examples of assessment tasks.

Early in 2012, the professional development program was publicised through the Association of Independent Schools of Queensland (ISQ) for interested and willing teachers to apply for a $2,000 grant that would allow them to participate in the program and carry out the small-scale action research project throughout the year. In their
applications, participating teachers were asked to articulate what they conceived as the intercultural orientation of their projects and intercultural understanding learning objectives, however, these were seen as work-in-progress, to be revisited through participation in the workshops and action research cycles of inquiry. Funds could be used for teacher release for the three-day learning program, time for planning and purchase of resources and further professional learning. Six projects were funded (see Table 1 below for details). Teachers (and/or team members) involved in each of these projects were required to attend all three professional development workshop sessions. The professional development program, in particular days 1 and 2, was open to all interested language teachers.

Each workshop in the three-session program began with an interactive presentation conducted by the researcher. This presentation was followed up with a series of activities aimed to guide participating teachers through the various steps in designing, implementing and evaluating their action research projects. Each of these three workshops aimed to mirror Larriève’s framework for conceptualising the stages of critical reflective processes (Larriève, 2000, p. 304). The first workshop aimed to examine and challenge theory and policy on intercultural language learning vis-à-vis participating teachers’ current practices, with the intention of promoting a desire for change and improvement. This process entailed problematising clichéd conceptualisations about language and culture’s ‘indivisibility’ or ‘isomorphic relationship’ as well as expressions like ‘language and culture are inseparable’ (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993a, 1999; Pulverness, 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). Problematising these conceptualisations aimed to offer teachers an opportunity to explore explicit, working definitions of this relationship (Fantini, 1991) in order to avoid the largely ad hoc, incidental incorporation of intercultural aspects into everyday practice which ultimately tends to favour the acquisition of linguistic competence over intercultural understanding.

The second workshop focused on grappling with the struggles inherent in changing teaching practices. We explored action research methodology and the underpinning ‘investigative stance’ in more detail to provide teachers with the tools to support cycles of planning, implementing, observing and reflecting. In the third and final workshop, we concentrated on sharing the outcomes of the projects as well as the personal and professional challenges encountered along the way. This allowed personal discovery to emerge individually and collaboratively through group feedback. In addition, we reflected on the importance of dissemination strategies (Hinton, Gannaway, Berry, & Moore, 2011) to support the sustainability of innovation in the context of the participating teachers’ transformed practices.

The sources of data collected by the researcher throughout the program consisted of the following (see Table 2: Data Sources).

Data collected throughout this project was described in Table 2 on page 168 were coded, utilising content analysis techniques. The coding process was supplemented by field notes taken by the researcher as well as subsequent informal discussions and email communications with teacher-participants. Content analysis revealed a number of recurrent key issues in teachers’ experiences and reflections which are explored below.

**FINDINGS**

Despite the small-scale nature of this study, considerable data were collected as the participant sample included teachers working individually and collaboratively (in situ and with peers overseas), as well as in various languages and levels of instruction.

The data drawn from the observations and interviews conducted prior to commencement of the professional development program provided an insightful perspective on the challenges experienced teachers face in order to integrate intercultural understanding teaching strategies in their language lessons. Indeed, identification of these challenges manifested as recurrent themes in the data which informed the first guiding research question. Four interrelated set of challenges emerged from these interview data:

1. **Time constraints**
2. **Materials**
3. **Assessment**
4. **Sustainability**

Time constraints referred to teachers’ perceived lack of time available to dedicate to the integration of an intercultural orientation in everyday tasks. Indeed, intercultural tasks are still perceived by many as ‘time away’ from the rest of the curriculum rather than as an intrinsic component of curricula.

The second challenge was concerned with the lack of readily available materials, graded according to levels of proficiency and sequentially organised to support intercultiurally-oriented practices which may help students engage critically with ‘their own cultural perspectives and practices and those of others’.

Assessment referred to the (perceived) difficult task of assessing the development of intercultural understanding, particularly given the impending need to coordinate

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**Table 1 – Mini-Action Research Projects Funded in 2012**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of Project</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Language(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project 1 Spanish Music Festival</td>
<td>Primary/Secondary</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project 2 Penfriends program with overseas sister school</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>German</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project 3 Intercultural understanding in the classroom</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project 4 Gift-giving practices</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Chinese and Japanese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project 5 Japanese cultural festival</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project 6 Japanese food festival</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Note that the titles of these projects have been changed to reflect their general nature without revealing their original title, therefore maintaining anonymity of participating teachers and schools)*
efforts among willing staff in different learning areas across the curriculum and to provide evidence of mapping a coherent, cumulative, sequentially-developed path for intercultural understanding.

Finally, sustainability was concerned with the idea of supporting the ongoing development and implementation of an intercultural dimension throughout an extended pedagogical sequence, beyond the task and lesson-plan level into a programmatic, cross-curricular approach.

The identified challenges were integrated into the content of the first workshop and helped to challenge participating teachers’ beliefs and assumptions about intercultural language learning and its realisation in practice. Here, teachers appreciated in particular

...some of the practical ideas that could be used in the classroom for example in the use of dialogues surrounding cultural issues.

I also found a lot of information for reflection on my own teaching as well as planning and making time to integrate culture with language teaching.

...Develop assessment accordingly [and] the notion of culture being taught from the beginning.

The last comment in particular was representative of the beliefs held by languages teachers regarding the integration of intercultural language learning from beginner levels in an accountable manner, that is, in relation to developing assessment tasks to monitor learners’ development of intercultural understanding.

The second workshop focused on the mechanics of action research projects, the selection of suitable data collection tools and mapping of the cycles of inquiry onto the upcoming teaching terms. As such, this session explored and articulated the integral nature of an ‘investigative stance’ in the development of interculturally-oriented teaching practices. This also helped prepare participating teachers to plan their dissemination strategies, in particular, the writing of their final reports and sharing of the main results of their inquiry at the third and final workshop. During this (final) workshop teacher-participants were particularly appreciative of the group reflection process which provided them with the opportunity to learn about each other’s ideas and strategies on how to deal with the challenges of developing intercultural understanding in different languages and at different levels of proficiency. Teachers’ comments in the workshop evaluation highlighted these aspects:

...colleagues’ presentations were brilliant and gave me a clear understanding of what culture means in the teaching-learning process in other languages

...advice about reflection on the projects themselves and how I can improve my own reflective practice

...comparing our project and level of intercultural understanding to others

...Identifying where this could be implemented in the classroom

Throughout this presentation session, however, it became clear that the type of projects and pedagogical goals developed at primary and secondary school level varied widely, particularly in relation to themes, but most importantly, in relation to the overall degree of integration of interculturally-oriented practices. With regard to themes, food and festivities-related themes were prevalent at primary school level, while at secondary school level teachers tended to favour similar themes but with more emphasis on the acquisition of specific speech acts and linguistic routines associated with these events.

With regard to integration of intercultural language learning practices, the data revealed a range from quite elementary to quite complex. At the most complex end, Project 4 provided nuanced understanding focused on the exploration of gift-giving routines in Japanese. It is presented here as an exemplar of valuable practice aimed at addressing the challenges explored in the first workshop. Table 3 on page 17 represents, visually, the main stages involved in the project’s development and implementation. This visual representation was created from the data presented by the teaching team in the third and final workshop.
In this project we see the integration of a critical, reflective task at the end of a sequence of activities. This task—Part 3 of the sequence of activities—required students to reflect on gift-giving practices in both Australian and Japanese cultures and to consider the kinds of linguistic expressions used in such situations as well as the cultural values embedded in these interactions. This process allowed students to make use of their comparative and interpretative skills to effectively engage with language and culture as elements of a meaning making system mutually influencing and influenced (Liddicoat & Scarron, 2013, p.49) by their own culture as well as the target culture. This aspect of the project was further enhanced with a set of rubrics developed by the teaching team to assess students’ reflective comments. This set of rubrics allowed them to consider different levels of learner engagement in the comparative and interpretative process. As such, the teaching team conceived of this task as a dual-purpose tool in that it allowed them to assess the achievement of student learning outcomes in relation to intercultural understanding as well as allowing the students and teachers to reflect on their own development and integration of interculturally-oriented teaching practices, thereby effectively engaging learners and teaching team in a shared process of accountability.

Participating teachers’ final reports provided important confirmation of the value of action research, particularly in providing important confirmation of the relationship between language and culture in intercultural language teaching practices; to the use of the first languages in class; to their own levels of intercultural understanding in dealing with other language teachers, in Australia and overseas; to the involvement and impact of their projects on the wider school community. With regard to the relationship between language and culture and overall intercultural language learning teaching practices, one of the participating teachers reflected on the importance of incorporating learners’ own culture(s) and experiences while acknowledging the challenging task of considering the variety of Spanish-speaking cultures.

Since attending the professional development sessions and addressing this project, I made it a point to incorporate more student inquiries into, and about cultural understanding and the relationships between cultures. We understand and appreciate our own cultures and personal experiences. Finally, I combine cultural components into each unit so that students can experience the diversity among Spanish-speaking countries.

The strategic and complementary use of English as a first language (or lingua franca) and the target language to scaffold students’ intercultural learning (Liddicoat, 2008; McBride & Seago, 2000) also emerged in teachers’ reflections. One of the teachers in primary school, for instance, reflected on the issue of assessment about the use of the target language:

I have come away from this project with a number of personal learnings. When dealing with cultural concepts, naturally [students] are not equipped to adequately explain in the Japanese language. I learnt that it is OK to assess the students in the English language in relation to cultural concepts. My intention was to provide a learning environment which was effective by immersion, but this is not necessarily possible or always effective.

This comment reflects a more dynamic conceptualisation of the uses of language in human communication. However, it is also an example of the types of assumptions languages teachers are still grappling with in working towards an intercultural orientation of language teaching practices, one that moves away from the structuralist, language-as-code conceptualisation of this task (Liddicoat & Kohler, 2012). Teachers also reflected on the need to plan intercultural discussions around questions that may trigger students’ critical reflection (Morgan, 2008b). Leading intercultural discussions through trigger questions is a pedagogical skill that requires explicit attention and experimentation. Indeed, no two student cohorts are alike in terms of engagement with such intercultural discussions. In addition, language teachers

### Table 3 – Project 4: Stages in development and implementation (Japanese)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of the Project</th>
<th>Students explored a social issue: Festivals and celebrations</th>
<th>They examined this topic from an inquiry approach</th>
<th>The focus was to design/choose a gift which would appeal to an Australian and/or Japanese teenager</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stages</strong></td>
<td>Students were asked to market and promote their chosen product/gift to a Japanese market</td>
<td>This was done in three parts:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term 2 2012: In groups of three, students were asked to investigate festivals and celebrations in Japan</td>
<td><strong>Part 1: Drama skits</strong></td>
<td><strong>Part 2: Formal individual presentations</strong></td>
<td><strong>Part 3: Analysis of language choices and behaviour</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students were to adopt the role of the narrator, shop assistant or customer to buy the product. Students were then to demonstrate giving/receiving the product as a gift at a celebration.</td>
<td>Students chose a role within their company to market the product. They were to describe what it looked like, price, purpose, colour, etc.</td>
<td>In 200-300 words students were asked to write about their choices in language – formality, similarities/differences in language structure, use of language to communicate ideas and inform others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main Results</strong></td>
<td>Students realised that the context of a situation could change while language patterns remain constant. More authentic language chosen. Student interactions were useful to develop a sense of intercultural identity.</td>
<td>Part 3 acted as a post test. It was a student reflection on our teaching. Teachers were able to reflect upon their current teaching beliefs and practices in relation to intercultural understanding.</td>
<td>Overall, the project helped to evaluate our teaching and students’ pace of learning.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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need to also be aware of and monitor their own reactions to students’ comments and additional questions.

Overall, teachers also indicated the importance of involving the wider school community in their projects. This involvement was an aspect that not only enhanced the outcome of their projects but also their potential to support future iterations, and thus, overall sustainability of their changing practices. This aspect is illustrated in the following teacher’s comment:

“I learnt that it is valuable to involve the wider school community, especially teachers that are not usually involved in the [languages] classroom. If done effectively these teachers extend the [languages] program and assist to extend the reach of [languages] outside the limited hours that students are engaged with formal [languages] teacher contact.

An additional challenge identified by teachers related to catering for various levels of language proficiency while attending to students’ intercultural language learning. This teacher’s comment illustrates this point, and also indicates current understandings about the value of learning not entirely focused on language acquisition, but on understanding:

The greatest challenge was in developing a program of learning that was effectively catering to the variety of different skill levels in the classroom. Whilst the program achieved the desired result of engaging and boosting students who had been struggling and integrated a wider audience in the school community, this came at a cost to the high performers in the classroom.

Finally, teachers involved in collaborative projects mentioned that in working collaboratively with other language teachers ‘different perspectives and understandings of the language-cultures link’ needed to be addressed, negotiated and openly discussed throughout the project. This is indeed an important aspect of teachers’ development of intercultural pedagogical development, and one that will be explored further in future iterations of this program.

IMPLICATIONS

The data from the workshop evaluations indicated that all three sessions developed for the professional development program were well-received by teachers. Based on the findings from the overall data collection process, a number of implications can be drawn to help answer the guiding research questions. Teachers’ responses confirmed the effectiveness of the professional development program, particularly in terms of promoting a bottom-up approach to professional learning and the development of a transformative, critical, reflective ‘investigative stance’. However, the diverse nature of the six projects and the various levels of integration of intercultural language learning practices revealed that individual teachers engaged quite differently with the process of re-envisioning their pedagogical stance. In terms of teachers’ professional learning, therefore, additional research needs to be conducted into the processes of teachers’ criticality development as well as their levels of critical engagement in intercultural language learning. Additional data collection tools such as journals or other types of regular reflective tasks as well as additional scaffolding from peers, mentors and researchers may shed some light on these issues.

With regard to the field of languages education, teachers’ critical reflections included in their final report suggest that additional research is needed on the actual ‘mechanics’ of intercultural dialectic learning in class. This research might include looking at examples of how to put into practice intercultural language learning activities, but also, more importantly, looking at how to develop teachers’ skills to guide intercultural discussions in class, the types of questions that may trigger students’ critical reflections which, in turn, may lead to deeper levels of intercultural understanding. In this vein, Liddicoat and Kohler (2012) provide ‘snapshots’ of this type of classroom data and demonstrate ways in which Indonesian language teachers promote and guide an intercultural dialogue in class. Languages teachers, however, still need to grapple with this in their own classrooms, making choices regarding the use of target language and English, while monitoring their own reactions and ways of responding to learners’ questions and points of view. This is also relevant in the case of students’ written reflections. With these, teachers are also required to provide feedback and scaffolding that may support deeper levels of reflection, a skill that needs to be further explored, particularly with a view to the development of suitable assessment tasks. Developing these types of skills, which may be referred to as teachers’ pedagogical competence in intercultural language learning, is an area that has been increasingly discussed in recent literature (Byram, 2012; Houghton, 2012; Houghton & Yamada, 2012) and warrants additional research. These typea of skills may also enhance discussions with other language teachers who have various conceptualisations of the language and culture nexus and the importance of developing and implementing intercultural language learning and teaching practices. As mentioned above, when working collaboratively, be it with other languages teachers, locally or overseas, or with teachers in other subject areas, it is necessary to consider all participants’ assumptions and beliefs. While future
The finding of this research suggests that the overall articulation of intercultural understanding at the micro-level of languages education is still at a rudimentary stage. While theorists continue to advance conceptualisations of language, culture and their interrelationship, along with ways of conceptualising intercultural understanding, practitioners continue to struggle to translate these conceptualisations into actual classroom practice. In other words, the continuous advancement of these concepts, theoretically, is in sharp contrast to the almost glacial pace at which substantive curricular reform occurs at the classroom level. Without continuous critical engagement with our beliefs and intercultural language learning-oriented practices, the vision of universal intercultural understanding across the curriculum in Australia may follow the same path as the intercultural understanding-driven curricular reform in the UK context, that is ‘a rather mechanistic, instrumental approach to its coverage in second languages […] a bolt-on, mechanistic, instrumental approach to its reform in the UK context, that is ‘a rather glacial pace at which substantive curricular reform occurs at the classroom level. Without continuous critical engagement with our beliefs and assumptions about the nature of language teaching. This type of critical engagement with our beliefs and assumptions about our profession and our practices lies at the core of developing, and modelling, the underpinnings of intercultural understanding.

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