Investigating intercultural competence: A doctoral experience

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ABSTRACT

This article traces my development as both a teacher and researcher of language and culture. It examines the development of my doctoral thesis through my interaction with notions of language and culture, grounded in professional practitioner experience. My doctoral research, which examined the nature of intercultural competence in young immersion language learners, has provided useful illustration of classroom intercultural development. Models developed from research findings have contributed to teacher understanding of both complex student outcomes and the teacher's role, in intercultural language pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

Our relationship with the focus of our research is often a personal one, shaped by our personal and professional background. This address is a narrative of my perceptions of language education and my resulting doctoral experience, reflecting the role that research may play in expressing and extending our professional vision.

My understanding of what is possible in language learning has been transformed by grappling firstly with changing notions of

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culture and secondly by an interaction with immersion language pedagogy. The intersection of these fields resulted in my doctoral research. The identification of intercultural competence in young immersion language learners highlights the personal growth involved in effective language education. The narrative also highlights the value of research grounded in professional practitioner experience.

TOWARDS A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF CULTURE

I graduated from the University of Sydney with a Bachelor of Arts with majors in French and German studies and a Diploma of Education, travelled in Europe, and became an enthusiastic high school teacher of French and German. I taught in various schools in Australia, Papua New Guinea and in France, using the pedagogies of the late 1970s and 80s. Like my colleagues, I taught about the cultural practices of France or Germany, often separate to language, on afternoons deemed too hot for students to concentrate on language work. The cultural canon included the relevant country's geography, festivals, food, fashion. It was the era when students begged travel agents for brochures and constructed projects on cardboard rather than on screens.

In the 1980s I took up Japanese studies, first as a hobby and then more seriously, to add Japanese to my teaching skills. This happened to coincide with the growth in Japanese teaching in the 1980s and 90s, driven by the economic rationale of that time, and, on returning to teaching, I became a Japanese specialist.

Learning Japanese brought new experiences. Hosting Japanese homestay students and visits to Japan opened up new ideas of what culture could be and challenged me to be a more personally involved player in the experience. It opened up new points of view, such as how Japanese students learn English, perceptions of Australia, and of myself. Teaching Japanese highlighted a new personal role of advocacy, mediation, empathy and explanation.

Corbett (2003) describes intercultural learning as involving an element of ethnography (Corbett, 2003). In 1998, I had an experience which in retrospect seems significant as providing me with an opportunity for ethnographic critical reflection. I was invited to be a participant in the doctoral research of Dr William Armour. Armour's (2001) doctorate was an exploration of the consequences of learning Japanese on the sense of self. He was interested in particular in the transition in identities, or identity slippage, in a number of Japanese teachers, examining their histories as learner, user, and teacher. William Armour observed and interviewed me at school several times, using qualitative methodology, taking a life history first-person narrative as data. When I eventually read the chapter of analysis about my story, it was an uncomfortable sensation, to see my learning history, my limitations and insecurities quoted on the page.

William Armour correctly assessed my Japanese language ability as less fluent, and the degree of 'slippage' into a Japanese identity as less marked, than his other participants. But he nevertheless was interested in the identity tussle I expressed, when he asked me what it meant to behave like a Japanese person:

> *I think I need to be in Japan to realise that I am really western... in my body language. I am the only person in the train that wears a loud parka and sits clumsily and has a bag that is shabby…. That's me… I do take on the Japanese woman's tone of voice…I tend to be less brash in Japanese because that is appropriate as a woman speaking Japanese. I still laugh more loudly than a Japanese woman does and I want to use superlatives the way we do in English. I think I am still reasonably authentically myself even though I'm moderating that to some extent.* (Armour, 2004: 116).

Armour (2004) comments that in the participant Sarah (my pseudonym):

> *There is some obvious tension between this display of herself and the demands to be appropriate when interacting in Japanese. When asked*

about what she has been required to do in learning Japanese, Sarah commented that

you feel the need to understand behaviour and how your behaviour can fit in better. Not to the point of mimicry or diverting from your own self but unconsciously you adapt. … I think you feel an obligation to understand Japanese people and to have an empathy and to expose yourself to experiences that help you understand better. (Armour, 2004: 119)

I was involved in a cultural process of change, trying to interpret and find meaning in this new relationship. I understood that my engagement with this culture was both a responsibility and fundamental to communicating well in the language. My lived discoveries, sharpened by Armour's critical interpretation, echo the theoretical concepts of the emerging intercultural language movement in UK, and US. This theoretical field has been shaped by the writing of Byram (1997) and his description of the five kinds of knowledge and skills ('savoirs') involved in language and culture, by Kramsch (1993) and her description of the student reaching an intercultural 'third' place, and in Australia, by Crozet and Liddicoat (1999). Space does not permit me to do credit to the detailed conceptual foundations represented in their writing.

The intercultural language movement took its roots from cultural anthropology. Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino and Kohler (2003) refer to a notion of culture as the lived experience of individuals. A description of culture developed by anthropologist Geertz (1973) resonates with my experience. Geertz proposes that the individual is "an animal suspended in webs of significance … I take culture to be those webs and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (Geertz, 1973: 5).

INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL STUDIES

While working as the Head of Languages Department in a school in Sydney, I completed a Masters of Media and Cultural Studies at

Macquarie University in 2000. This was a perception-changing experience, which brought me speedily up to date with the 'new humanities' (Fuery & Mansfield, 1997), new outlooks on culture and language due to the advent of semiotics and postmodernism, and the critical analysis of cultural practices and representation. Corbett (2003) applauds the discipline of Cultural Studies for its indirect positive influence on the understanding of culture within language teaching.

This degree was chosen as nourishment outside of my teaching context, as I had grown impatient with a type of language teaching which was devoid of context, isolated from the holistic development of students, and often producing limited cultural awareness. I wrote:

> *The LOTE classroom is fundamentally artificial…the structural body of the lesson is most commonly taught in English. Students perceive the situation of speaking Japanese to a non-Japanese teacher, or another English speaking student, in the performance of role-plays, is a nonsense…there can only ever be an imagined need to speak. This gives rise to perceptions of artificiality and 'intellectual play'. Many students tire of supporting this intellectual game without intercultural context* (Moloney, 2000: 37).

I used my new skills to critique the culture of Australian LOTE teaching (Languages Other Than English, used at the time to denote foreign language teaching) and its relationship with Australian multiculturalism, with a background influence of the work of anthropologist Ghassan Hage. Hage (1998) explores how White Australia displays negative attitudes towards visual difference, public display of foreign language use, and indifference to the inclusion of languages in the curriculum. In conducting research interviews of a number of high school language teachers, I found that their discourse displayed ethnocentric and Orientalist perspectives, and that they used sometimes paternalistic and negative language in speaking about the culture they taught and the native speakers in their class. The teachers were avid and well-meaning supporters of the 'tolerance discourse' which Hage notes

often increases the power gap between the tolerator and the tolerated. My conclusion was that attitudes to language learning were inextricably tied up in this discourse.

While Australian language teachers and curriculum designers have believed that there is a causal positive effect of language learning in producing a more tolerant community (Board of Secondary Education, 1989), little research had been done as to what *kind* of language learning might be required to produce this effect. Byram (1989) established that attitude change does not follow automatically from mere exposure to another culture. If it is the case that a school teaches not subjects but subjectivities, I wondered what subjectivities were being taught in a language learning which kept culture as distant, foreign and without personal engagement.

My conclusions as to the nature and outcomes of LOTE teaching of that time were clearly negative. The only positive light I could see was the development of the intercultural language movement with which I had some marginal contact. The heart of the intercultural concept resonated with my experience, and represented a challenge for all language teachers and students.

WHAT DOES INTERCULTURAL LANGUAGE LEARNING INVOLVE?

In intercultural language learning a student is actively engaged in developing an understanding of both the target language and culture, and their own. That is, there is explicit attention, time and effort devoted to drawing from students their perceptions of the relationships and connections between languages and cultures. The goal is to recognise and negotiate variable points of view in intercultural communication.

Intercultural language learning is a:

dynamic process that engages the learner in contributing to intercultural interaction, in finding personal ways of negotiating such interaction, and in reflecting on his/her own intercultural space

and identity (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino & Kohler, 2003: 45).

Corbett (2003) adds that the intercultural language user has the ability to not only understand the language and behaviour of the target community but also to:

> *explain it to members of the 'home' community- and vice versa. .. it trains learners to be diplomats, able to view different cultures from a position of informed understanding* (Corbett, 2003: 2).

I continue to find this understanding educationally exciting and moving. It adds a new dimension of critical thinking and holistic development to language education. If it is possible to use the word 'spiritual' outside a religious context, I believe that students develop spiritually through examining their own beliefs and the beliefs of others. Students recognise that their own country's values and practices are one particular way of doing things. Students recognise that Australian culture, while diverse, lies in the activities we pursue, choices we make, ways we spend our time and money, and the language we use to carry out our lives.

Students recognition of their family's values and choices, and of how customs and communication have been shaped by climate, history and geography, can be a ground shaking experience. In the light bulb moment of seeing the arbitrary and relative nature of it, the student understands they must give up their habit of keeping culture at arm's length, as 'exotic' and engage with it as a fellow human being.

A significant piece of intercultural research focussed on the contextual meaning of the question "Did you have a good weekend?" (Béal, 1992: 23). Students identify that two Australians ask and understand this question as a form of Monday morning greeting, and will most often reply 'Yes, not bad' and keep walking. To French participants, however, it is understood as a more serious question, for which the participants may stop, and engage in an account of meals eaten, films watched and illnesses endured. Why

do the French understand this social demand? It takes students some time to arrive at the understanding that the French typically attach value not only to the items talked about, but also to the art of conversation itself, and so invest time in it.

Intercultural language teaching units have been developed across different languages and year levels, through the Intercultural Language Teaching and Learning Project (ILTLP, 2007) through the University of South Australia. In a unit I wrote for Year 12 Japanese classes (http://www.iltlp.unisa.edu.au/doclibexamples) my intention was to examine a range of social and youth issues, to uncover the continuous thread of common values and social change which underlies them. I wanted to avoid regarding the issues 'at arm's length' as dysfunctional Japanese problems, but to engage and compare with social values and behaviours in Australia. Students would be able to demonstrate this deeper knowledge in higher quality writing and more reflective in-depth answers to reading comprehensions.

Students identified the values which lay behind behaviour, in both Japan and Australia. My then practicum student Kenichi Miyashita examined the three generations of his own family in Tokyo, and the change in traditional values and behaviours, the shift of social focus from the group to the individual. My students examined changes in their own families. Jessica, from an Italo-Australian family, observed that her family valued food, family, cars and hard work, and identified the change in values and female roles, between her grandmother, mother and herself. Jessica noted this was the first time she had ever been asked to do this, and she found it moving and engaging. With an understanding of values and a willingness to reflect, students engaged more deeply with difficult questions as to the social issues in Japan.

TOWARDS A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF LANGUAGE

In 2002 I moved to International Grammar School, in inner-city Sydney. This is an independent, secular, co-educational school,

encompassing preschool, primary and secondary school. Every child is part of a second language stream, either French, German, Japanese or Italian, and that language is pursued compulsorily from the point of school entry until Year 10 (the fourth year of Secondary school). Spanish and Chinese are additional options in the high school.

This was my first contact with immersion language pedagogy, in the primary school language teaching. Children spend a quarter of every day in their second language class, studying selected units of the primary curriculum in that language. The children acquire remarkable comprehension, a confident oral production, and progressively build good literacy skills. In my teaching career, I had never seen children who were so clearly happy, displaying strong language skills, singing, playing and producing language (Moloney, 2004).

The immersion teaching in the primary is modelled on the method developed in the first immersion school, St Lambert's School in Montreal, Canada, established in 1965. It is based on the understanding that young children learn a second language most effectively in a similar way to the acquisition of their first language, through play and experiential content-based activities.

In order to speak with authority about the program to parents, I became familiar with the research on immersion learning. The literature, mostly North American, is both quantitative and qualitative in methodology and outlook, and examines the benefits of immersion learning. A sample of research includes the studies of Lambert and Tucker (1972), Swain and Johnson (1997), Swain and Lapkin (1981) and more recently Lazaruk (2007), Potowski (2007) and Tedick and Fortune (2008). Studies of immersion programs in Australia include those by McNamara (1990) and De Courcy (1995). Swain and Lapkin (2005) have called for more research focussing on sociocultural aspects and exploration of student experience. Immersion pedagogy is also very close in nature and outcomes to content-based language learning, more common at the high school

level, which is gaining ground as a pedagogy in Europe and UK (Coyle, 2006).

To provide professional development for my staff, and to link them with staff in the sixty other Australian immersion schools I set up a Bilingual Immersion Group (BIG) (http://www.bilingualimme rsion.nsw.edu.au). The site features resources, cameo lessons, research, links, and media items. A typical lesson about dental health for Year 2 Italian students includes an experiment where students soak a tooth in Coca Cola and observe what happens.

The immersion pedagogy addressed the dissatisfactions I had levelled at my previous language teaching. These children had a context, they could speak in a natural way to their teachers, and even the weakest students appeared to have a sense of themselves as bilingual. I considered what match there might be between outcomes in the children in this environment and the notion of intercultural competence. Is the immersion pedagogy itself a facilitator of intercultural competence? What do their teachers do that might be important in this? My research goal became to analyse the immersion pedagogy from an intercultural perspective.

MOVING INTO RESEARCH

Many teachers have been hesitant until recently about implementing intercultural language learning. This was due in part to the lack of illustration of what classroom practice or outcomes would look like. Liddicoat (2004) writes that "we do not have descriptions of what intercultural competence looks like" (Liddicoat, 2004: 18). Harbon and Browett (2006: 28) note that "there are few examples of related classroom practice" to help teachers. This gap in the literature could be addressed in my school-based research. If this school immersion program were a useful environment for observation of intercultural competence in action, then it would be of illustrative value to the wider teaching community. My doctoral project was integrated in my work and enriched my daily understanding of what I was witnessing in the school.

I started studying for my doctorate part-time in 2004, continuing to work fulltime as Director of Languages at the school. All doctoral projects run on an expensive fuel of enthusiasm, disciplined time management, occasional discouragement and perseverance, but I enjoyed it greatly and thank my supervisor Dr Lesley Harbon for her expertise, interest and detailed reading of my work. In a Doctorate of Education two course work units additionally provided an overview of research epistemologies and of education professional practice, and contributed to understanding of the research context to which I belonged.

I progressed through five stages in developing my thesis. In the groundwork stage, I refined my research questions and choice of methodologies and compiled the literature review. The second stage, developing the thesis proposal, resulted in some streamlining. The third stage, the data collection in the school, was the most exciting stage, hearing children describe their language experience. The fourth stage, writing up the analysis of the data, was demanding but very stimulating. In the fifth stage, the thesis was edited and prepared for marking.

RESEARCH

My three research questions became:

Research question 1: What are the behaviours and understandings in upper primary-aged students which are perceived to be indicative of intercultural competence?

Research question 2: What are the behaviours and understandings in teachers which are perceived to facilitate development of intercultural competence in students?

Research question 3: What is a useful framework of understanding intercultural language learning in primary school language learners?

The key notion of intercultural competence was clarified by definitions taken from the literature. Various authors describe the learner with intercultural competence as:

- being a purposeful interactive user of language with correct contextual use (Kramsch, 1993; Liddicoat *et al.*, 2003)

- having metalinguistic skill and linguistic transfer skills (Bialystok, 2001)

- being knowledgeable about target culture (Byram, 1997), being reflective about the relationship between learner's cultures (Liddicoat *et al.*, 2003; Sercu, 2002) and developing a sense of an intermediate 'place' in ownership of an independent intercultural identity (Kramsch, 1993).

Research participants

Forty-nine students and four teachers were involved in the project. The students were in Year 6 primary school, aged ten or eleven years old. They were the students of the Year 6 German class (16 students), French class (18 students) and Japanese class (15 students). They had all been members of their second language group for up to eight years, depending on their point of entry to the school. For twelve of the students, English was not their first language. Many cultural backgrounds and languages were represented amongst their families.

Methodology

Data collection was designed to deliver specific information about:

(a) students' intercultural behaviours in class

(b) students' perceptions of their interculturality

(c) teachers' perceptions of the teacher role in intercultural learning

(d) teachers' behaviour in class.

To achieve this, students took part in semi-structured focus group interviews. In these group discussions students answered a number of semi-structured questions. I also used two other minor instrum-

ents in the focus group. The first was a simple amended model of the Bennett Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1993), a six stage description of attitude change. The students matched themselves against this model, as an indicator of their self-perception. The second instrument was the Young Learners' Language Strategy Use Survey (Cohen & Oxford, 1992), which was to determine whether students used strategies in the immersion situation which might indicate particular metalinguistic skills. The data from these instruments proved less interesting than the rich textual data from the discussions.

In addition their language teachers were interviewed. Students and teachers were also observed in a number of classroom lessons and field notes were taken. These different data sources allowed for the triangulation of data to inform the study.

Data coding and analysis technique

An iterative inductive process was used in the coding and analysis of data transcribed from audio tapes. A code list was developed with codes drawn from the research literature, from the learning outcomes in the local syllabus (Board of Studies NSW, 2003) and from the data itself, and relationships between the themes were investigated. The number of students whose comments were linked to a particular theme was tallied, to find the high frequency issues and attitudes (Moloney & Harbon, 2008). Students are represented below by pseudonyms.

Research findings

It was a privilege to read the transcripts of the children's and teachers' voices and to have access to their accounts of their experience of language development.

In answering Research Question 1, I found it remarkable that a high frequency of student comments indicated that

1. Students saw themselves as purposeful language users in a meaningful cultural context. They rate their spoken interaction ability as the key part of their intercultural competence.

   If you actually speak it, you learn new things (Sharon)

   We know it in French, we're thinking in French, we're understanding in French (Philippe)

2. Students had metalinguistic abilities which were part of their intercultural competence.

   The actual language itself, if you translate it, its backwards (Crystal)

   You get more understanding how language works (Paul)

3. Students were engaged in reflective ability to analyse their relationship and their identification with the target culture, and their ownership of their non-native status in the target language.

   When I came here I was zero percent French, but after the first lesson I was one percent, and the next lesson five percent, and that confidence has gone up and over the last year I thought I got to about 40% French (Naomi, who entered the school in Year 4).

To answer Research Question 2, I carried out a similar coding and analysis of the teacher interview data, and then linked it with themes in the student data. I found that three things, the teachers' own interculturality, their modelling of their bilingualism, and their design of tasks, all appeared to facilitate the development of intercultural competence in the students.

To answer Research Question 3 I developed a model representing the interaction of specific teacher behaviours with the development of specific aspects of intercultural competence in the students (Moloney, 2008a).

Research Conclusions

My thesis conclusions (Moloney, 2008b) each of which has pedagogical implications, are represented in three publications which have followed:

1. The case study students perceive that it is their speaking ability which is linked dynamically to their ability to participate, to learn, to belong and to change, as part of their intercultural identity formation (Moloney & Harbon, 2008)

2. Teacher awareness and understanding of interculturality in themselves and their students, their modelling of their spoken interaction, their own metalinguistic knowlege and their priorities in task design, all appear to actively facilitate particular aspects of intercultural competence in students (Moloney, 2008a)

3. The active involvement of the student in intercultural identity construction is the foundation upon which effective language learning is enacted (Moloney, 2009).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

I have become an advocate of school-based research which enhances teacher understanding of practice and quality learning in students and contributes to research development. Two research directions have emerged from my doctoral research. The concept of 'intercultural capital' (Mayer, Luke & Luke, 2008) in teachers across the curriculum, is emerging as an important skill for education in the twenty-first century. Although my analysis of the teacher data contributed to my research findings, it was not at that time my principal interest, as my focus lay on the students. Currently I am looking more closely at the teacher data. A further study of wider implications of the teacher data in this light may provide a useful illustration in the conceptualisation of 'intercultural capital'. It may be that language research can give direction in this broad curriculum initiative.

Secondly, the students of the study are now in Year 8, moving through adolescence. A 2008 study of students in Years 7 and 8 in language classes at the same school, has observed how intercultural learning is performed and analysed by students.

Undertaking my Doctorate of Education stretched my boundaries as an educator extended my professional vision, enabled me to make a practice-based contribution to language research, and given me new skills and opportunities. I support it as an outstanding form of professional development.

THE AUTHOR

Robyn Moloney is a lecturer in pre-service teacher education in Languages, in the Department of Education, Faculty of Human Sciences, Macquarie University. Her research interests now include intercultural language education, heritage language learners and intercultural competence in educators at all levels. She continues to be involved in many language teacher professional development activities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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