

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE LEARNING: TOWARDS MULTILINGUALITY

Angela Scarino

Research Centre for Languages and Cultures
University of South Australia

Abstract

In the development of current perspectives on language learning, there is an increasing recognition of the limits of communicative language teaching as it is practiced in particular contexts and with this an emphasis on the 'bilingual turn' and the development of multilinguality. This emphasis represents a shift from a monolingual view of language learning to one which recognises the relationships among the language(s) that learners bring to their learning and the language being learnt. Drawing on examples from classroom based research and with recent work on development of a national curriculum for language learning in Australia, I discuss some of the characteristic features of learning within a multilingual and multicultural perspective and I discuss implications for teaching practice.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of a dynamic, social, cultural economic and political world, there are marked changes in the ways in which different languages are used and relate to each other in local, national, regional and international contexts. In languages education these changes emerge in two related areas that require some reconsideration. These are:

- multilingualism in diverse contexts; the construct of 'communicative competence' and communicative language teaching as it is currently practiced.

Both of these developments point to the need for an expanded view of languages education with important implications for curriculum design, teaching, learning, assessment, evaluation and teacher professional learning.

Reconsidering multilingualism in diverse contexts

Diverse and dynamic contexts of multilingualism

Multilingualism in countries such as Australia has been used to describe the phenomenon of people from diverse languages and cultures coming together and living "in harmony". Our countries and histories are different but both are described as being 'multilingual'. The same word, however, represents very different sociocultural and linguistic ecologies. Multilingualism in our countries is part of the context, the landscape of education, and languages education plays a distinctive role in that context. With intense

globalisation the movement of people and ideas has increased in a way that is unprecedented. Educational systems particularly in English-dominant Western countries have tended to respond with ambiguity about multilingualism and moves towards standardisation (for example in developing common curriculum and assessment frameworks to guide education, including languages education).

Stroud and Heugh (2011) explain, however, that the multilingualism of the nature and scale that we are experiencing in our contemporary world changes the very nature of multilingualism, of language and of language learning. They state:

Classroom and curricula need to be able to engage with and build on the diversity in semiotic modes that learners bring into the classroom... The shifting nature of learner personae and subjectivities point to the need for new understandings of the teaching/learning process... particularly its individuation to accommodate different types of learning biographies emanating from the heterogeneity of learning environments and biographies, social trajectories, and related interactional experiences of speakers/learners. (Stroud & Heugh, 2011, 424)

In any particular educational community it becomes necessary to take into account the macro features of the ecology of languages in use in that particular context. This means, for example, that English language learning in Indonesia cannot be the same as learning English language in Singapore, Hong Kong or Australia.

There is no doubt that English is the global language of international business, communication technologies, popular culture, and (higher) education. Equally, it is clear that what is needed in our multilingual and multicultural global context is people who can communicate successfully across languages and cultures and across diverse forms of media. What is needed is an *intercultural capability* that enables people (1) to communicate successfully across languages and cultures (East and West) and (2) to do so with mutual or reciprocal sensitivity, understanding and respect. In fact, it is impossible, I would argue, to achieve the first, without the second.

In language learning (SLA) specifically, it means addressing the monolingual bias.

2.2 Manifestations of multilingualism

The reconsideration of multilingualism particularly in relation to languages education is manifested in many ways. Some of these include:

the concept of “multilingualism” that foregrounds diversity included are not only varieties such as national languages but also regional languages, minority languages, migrant languages, sign languages, and, in the broadest sense dialects (Franceschini, 2011)

the notion of acquiring and developing several languages in the learner’s repertoire at a time

‘In contrast to more traditional approaches that look at one language at a time ... we propose a holistic approach that takes into account all of the languages in the learner’s repertoire (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011, 339)

This includes phenomena such as code-switching, translanguaging and codemeshing, as characteristic of multilingual practices.

‘multicompetence’

“multicompetence refers to the coexistence of more than one language in the same mind” (Cook 2005, 1).

the bilingual turn (Ortega, 2010)

“Keep visible focus on multilinguality, en-

gaging in the analysis of L1/L2 users’ multiple language repertoires and viewing bilingualism as potentiality”

multilinguality, multimodality – code and mode switching

“the use of different linguistic systems – the choice of specific languages, switching between languages, mixing and temporary borrowing of elements from languages that are not part of the speaker’s normal linguistic repertoire, imitating other speakers’ accents or styles, as well as switching among speech, writing and signing” (Wei 2011, 370)

translanguaging (Garcia 2009)

refers to the multiple discursive practices, that is, seeing languaging as an activity/an action – bilinguals use of all their linguistic resources simultaneously to make meaning dynamically, in context.

identity theory

Negotiating identity positions in a changing social world through the power of narrative (Norton 2000)

3.0 Reconsidering ‘communicative language teaching’

3.1 The critique

Although communication remains a central goal in language learning, there is a reconsideration of the construct of ‘communicative’ competence and of communicative language teaching.

Leung (2005) notes that when the notion of ‘communicative competence’ was first introduced (by Hymes 1972) it represented a major paradigm shift; this shift meant that it became necessary to consider not only grammatical rules but also the social rules of use. This expansion to include ‘the social’ brought with it a need to consider the context of communication – both the context of situation and the context of culture. Leung notes that what was initially a research concern, over time has become a pedagogic doctrine. In fact, communication (or communicative competence) at different times and in different contexts has come to be seen as a theoretical construct, a goal, and an approach to pedagogy. In some contexts, it has come to be seen primarily as ‘transactional’ communication in the target

language, separated from social, historical and cultural contexts. In some contexts, it has also come to be seen as separate from the grammar that underpins language use.

A further critique has come from Byrnes (2006) who highlights the fact that communication as a goal varies considerably depending on who the learners are.

The profession is being challenged... to find principled ways of linking foreign, heritage (in ACARA terms: 'background learner') and native language instruction, to suggest ways of engaging all language users in continued language development toward high functional multilingualism in diverse hybrid spaces.

She highlights that the goal of learning languages is 'functional multilingualism', recognising that learners not only need to be able to use the languages that they are learning, but that they also need to be able function 'in-between' languages and cultures with monolingual native-speakers but also, and most importantly, with multilingual users of the specific language.

Kramsch (2009, 2011) has provided a critique of communicative language teaching through her sustained development of intercultural language teaching and learning. She (2006) states:

Today it is not sufficient for learners to know how to communicate meanings; they have to understand the practice of meaning-making.

In other words, Kramsch highlights learning a language within an intercultural orientation as a dual process of communication to exchange meanings and to analyse and understand how the process of meaning-making actually works. She emphasises here that Language learning is not only about learning to exchange words, but also to appreciate that words carry particular meanings and resonances that are connected to prior experiences and memory – all of which are cultural. This dual process gives greater salience in contemporary language learning to understanding the process of interpretation.

Scarino (2010) highlights that the fact that acts of both using a specific language and learning a language involve 'moving between' linguistic and cultural systems. She proposes:

an orientation to teaching languages (that) seeks the transformation of students' identities in the act of learning. This is achieved through a constant referencing of the language being learned with their own language(s) and culture(s). In so doing students decentre from their own linguistic and cultural world to consider their own situatedness from the perspective of another. They learn to move between their linguistic and cultural world and that of the users of the target language.

This notion of 'moving between' systems and worlds highlights communication across languages and cultures as a bi- or multilingual, rather than a monolingual, phenomenon. The decentring focuses on reflecting on diverse perspectives as well as the learners' identities.

Reframing language use and language learning

These critiques of and invitations to re-frame language learning give rise to the particular features of language use and language learning might be used in language teaching and learning. These are the features that I have proposed in the development curricula for Languages in the new Australian curriculum (see the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Languages* http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/Draft+Shape+of+the+Australian+Curriculum+-+Languages+-+FINAL.pdf) that include:

- language as personal, expressive, used by people in highly diverse contexts (Shohamy 2001);
- language as connected to social, cultural, historical contexts;
- language use and language learning as multilingual acts, for there are always at least two languages in play for all learners;
- language used to both exchange meanings *and* to understand the practice of meaning-making; in communicating and in learning, learners focus on description, analysis and interpretation of phenomena that are

shared, as well as active engagement in interpreting self (intraculturality) and others (interculturality), reciprocally, in diverse contexts of social exchange;

- language as mediating learning and knowing – learning how to mean (Halliday 1993);
- language use as reciprocal and entailing reflection to connect it meaningfully to the learners and their lives.

In communication with one another there is always a reciprocal relationship at work when ‘my-self’ interacts with ‘your-self’, when one-individual interacts with other-individuals, and when one group/community

communicates with another one.

In teaching and learning this reciprocal nature of interaction between learners and teachers assists in the creation of meaning towards successful communication. This reciprocity in meaning-making is a fundamental premise for learning how to be part of the communicating world; it provides the integrating element in learning how people acquire the skills to communicate and interact with one another in any given environment of culture and language use.

5.0 Some examples

In summary, the understanding of language learning is captured in the table that follows:

Table 1: Reframing language, culture and learning

View of language

Language as word; structural, grammatical itself, system; code making	↔	language as a social practice involving diverse contexts of use	↔	elaborate social practice to highlight not just the act or the practice but people and their meaning
tion		participants in a practice	↔	reciprocal process of interpretation of the language and the person, and the self

View of culture

culture as facts; diverse artefacts; information ally interpret	↔	culture as social practice; ways of doing things and thinking/seeing the world in diverse cultures	↔	elaborate to highlight not just practices but culture as the lens through which people mutually and communicate meaning
---	---	--	---	---

View of learning

acquisition of new learning knowledge	↔	participation in use of knowledge/knowing how to use as well as knowing about language	↔	elaborate to highlight how as making sense or coming to understand involves becoming aware of how learners interpret knowledge through their language and culture
---------------------------------------	---	--	---	---

Example 1: ESL in the South Australian classroom

Teacher explanation of student learning

'So it was just really interesting to see that, to see them move away from this idea, that you know, good old western society has gone in and we've improved the conditions of Chinese women and to see that, that was actually much more than that. So that was great cos' then they realised it was so much more and there were things that, they then also started to reflect on Western society and how things weren't so great in living here either.... that was nice to see that they sort of really took on a more global and rather than, took a less judging perspective ...and I think they took a lot more ownership of these issues that were being raised. So that was really good to see.

...

One of the struggles that I think I really had for myself in it, was when it came to, assessment because I had, structured the task which I worried a little bit had guided them in some way to the responding. But I sort of started off with getting them to think about what values they held in a woman by writing or presenting a speech about a woman that they admired. It was really good to see quite a few of them write about their mum or sister, rather than some big celebrity or something. So that was

really good. But that got them to think about themselves and what they valued.

..... some of the sentences, some of the things they were saying in language, I was like wow, I haven't taught them this. And they were making up their own sentences and really because they obviously had something they wanted to say. So that was really good, cos' I found their language just went up a notch, which was fantastic.'

Example 2: An Australian ESL-syllabus in Malaysia

Part B (Questions 10 and 11)
(20 marks)

Answer either Question 10 or Question 11. Write your answer in the separate script book.

10.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Old Town Hall To Be Replaced

The Chief Executive Officer of Grove Park Council, Ms Anne Moffatt, announced yesterday that the old town hall in Market Square will be demolished, and a new town hall will be built in East Parade.

The Council is considering options for the use of the old site in Market Square.

The Daily News, 16 October 2005

Write a formal letter of approximately 200 words in response to the text above.

11.



Source: www.haltomcitycitizen.com/images/bike%20accident2.jpg

Write a formal letter of approximately 200 words in response to the photograph above.

Mr. Jiage Feng
 325 Parking Road,
 Stirling
 Adelaide S.A. 5010

7th November 2005

The Editor
 Australia Daily News
 1000 King's Road, CBD
 Adelaide S.A. 5000

Dear Sir / Madam,

I write to inform you a traffic accident happened ^{in front} ~~in front~~ of my house, where a bicycle and a car collided together.

The accident happened almost in lunch time, at about ~~to~~ twelve o'clock, when I was cooking at home. The sound of the collision of the vehicles was so ~~loud~~ ^{loud} that sounds like a lightning. The sound attract many people, a crowd of people who were looking on during a very short period of time. Then I heard a ~~loud~~ ^{loud} complaining from a young man. I saw the young man was lying on the road and a broken bicycle was next to him. The driver, an older man, was standing besides the young man.

The police came the accident place in five minutes, and the two men were taken to police station. Fortunately, the two men were ~~not~~ not injured seriously. The young man only broke his skin of arms. The accident place had been protected and police had ~~to~~ took several photographs.

I took a photo for you and would you report the accident in tomorrow's newspaper because it is important to educate people to follow the traffic rules. If possible, would you please come here and I could give you more details.

I am looking forward to your reply.

Yours faithfully,
 Mr. Jiage Feng
 Jiage Feng

References

- ACARA (2011) Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Languages http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/Draft+Shape+of+the+Australian+Curriculum+-+Languages+-+FINAL.pdf
- Byrnes, H. (2008). Articulating a foreign language sequence through content: a look at the culture standards. *Language Teaching*. 41, 1, 103-118.
- Byrnes, H. (2006). Perspectives. Interrogating communicative competence as a framework for collegiate foreign language study. *The Modern Language Journal*. 90, 2, 244-246.
- Cenoz, J. & Gorter, D. (2011). A Holistic approach to multilingual education: introduction. *The Modern Language Journal*. 95, 3, 339-343.
- Cook, V.J. (2005) Multicompetence: Black hole or wormhole? Retrieved from www.tc.columbia.edu/academic/tesol/SLRF2005/VivianCook.pdf.
- Creese, A. & Blackledge, A. (2010). Translanguaging in the bilingual classroom: a pedagogy for learning and teaching? *The Modern Language Journal*. 94, 1, 103-115.
- Franceschini, R. (2011). Multilingualism and multicompetence: a conceptual view. *The Modern Language Journal*. 95, 3, 344-355.
- Garcia, O. (2009). *Bilingual education in the 21st century: global perspectives*. Malden, MA. Blackwell
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1993). Towards a language-based theory of learning. *Linguistics and Education*. 4, 93-116.
- Hymes, D. (1972). On communicative competence. In J.B. Pride and J. Holmes (Eds.) *Sociolinguistics*. London. Penguin.
- Kramsch, C. (2011). The symbolic dimension of the intercultural. *Language Teaching*. 44, 3, 354-367.
- Kramsch, C. (2009). *The multilingual subject*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.
- Kramsch, C. (2006). From communicative competence to symbolic competence. *The Modern Language Journal*. 90, 2, 249-252.
- Leung, C. (2005). Convivial communication: recontextualising communicative competence. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*. 15, 2, 19-144.
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Harlow, UK, Longman/Pearson Education.
- Ortega, L. (2010). The bilingual turn in SLA. Plenary delivered at the Annual Conference of the American Association for Applied Linguistics. Atlanta GA, March 6-9.
- Shohamy, E. (2006). *Language policy. Hidden agendas and new approaches*. London & New York. Routledge.
- Stroud, C. & Heugh, K. (2011). Languages in education. In R. Mesthrie (Ed) *Cambridge Handbook of Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. pp.413-429.
- Wei, L. (2011) Multilinguality, multimodality, and multicompetence: code -and mode-switching by minority ethnic children in complementary schools. *The Modern Language Journal*. 95, 3, 370-384.