

NAVIGATING EAST AND WEST: LANGUAGE TEACHERS AS INTERCULTURAL MEDIATORS

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Abstract

The move in recent times from a native speaker norm as the ultimate goal of language learning to a bilingual speaker norm requires a new understanding of the role of the language teacher. Rather than transmitter of knowledge or facilitator of learning, the language teacher is a mediator of language and culture, standing between students' language(s) and culture(s) and the target language and culture. This role presents a number of challenges for language teachers as they consider the implications for their practice and for their own linguistic and cultural identities. Using examples from teachers of Indonesian as a second language in Australian schools, this paper examines how teachers of languages must navigate the local and the additional language and culture with their students in practice.

Keywords: *Mediation, intercultural, language teaching*

Introduction

The contexts in which learners mediate new languages and cultures are increasingly complex and localised and rather than being restricted to a foreign country or culture, can be seen occurring between peoples of diverse languages and cultures within a single national culture. In contemporary times, language users have to navigate complex and unpredictable exchanges in which there may be many languages and cultures at work. Many scholars advocate the need for a new orientation towards language learning to reflect this flexibility and complexity. They argue that monolingual orientations towards native speaker like proficiency should be replaced by goals that develop learners' ability to 'read people, situations and events based on a deep understanding of the historical and subjective dimensions of human experience' (Kramsch, 2008). Hence, there have been attempts to shift to a bilingual speaker norm who:

... can operate their linguistic competence and their sociolinguistic awareness of the relationship between language and culture and the context in which it is used, in order to manage interaction across cultural boundaries, to anticipate misunderstandings caused by differences in values, meanings and beliefs, and thirdly, to cope with the affective as well as cognitive de-

mands of engagement with otherness.

With these understandings in mind, this paper explores how intercultural perspectives on language teaching and learning may be understood in practice and considers implications for the role of language teachers.

Intercultural perspectives on language teaching and learning

The shift in focus to a bilingual or plurilingual speaker as a goal for languages education means that there is an assumed multiplicity of languages at play in the language classroom and that learners bring with them at least one other language (and culture) in addition to the target language (and culture). This is most likely the norm in Indonesia where children enter school with regional/local languages often as their first language and with Indonesian in their wider social environment. The interplay of learners' multiple languages and cultures lies at the heart of intercultural perspectives on language teaching and learning. According to an intercultural view, language and culture are integrated systems through which people interact in, interpret and reflect on their worlds. As Byram(1988) states:

...language has no function independent of

the context in which it is used, thus language always refers to something beyond itself: the cultural context.

Thus, culture is the context for language and language is always contextually bound. As Kramersch (1998) explains:

Language is the principal means whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways.

Within any society, individuals are socialised into their primary language and culture. As learners come into contact with the new society, they encounter new concepts from those acquired through their primary and secondary socialisation. Learners must make sense of a new linguistic and cultural system from that into which they have already been socialised. An individual's subjective frame of reference is transformed based on new insights and experiences, and the existing frame of reference remains alongside new frames which are activated according to the contextual needs. Kramersch (1993) argues that individuals, even within the same culture, are constantly navigating a sense of 'self' as they operate between many cultures and identities, individual and social. The starting position of a learner is the first language and culture, as they come into contact with an additional 'new' language and culture.

Intercultural language learning and the role of the language teacher

In an intercultural perspective on language teaching and learning, language and culture are inextricably linked, and language learners are involved in navigating multiple linguistic and cultural systems in the process of becoming intercultural speakers (Crozet and Liddicoat, 1999, Damen, 1987, Buttjes, 1991, Kramersch, 1993, Moran, 2001, Liddicoat et al., 2003, Lange, 1999). Students are active participants in the target language and culture, observing, interpreting, abstracting, and in doing so, develop new learning and under-

standings whilst de-centring from their own cultural and linguistic system, such that they are able to accept diverse points of view.

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Of particular importance for intercultural perspectives on language teaching and learning is the concept of mediation understood as:

...the process through which humans deploy culturally constructed artifacts, concepts, and activities to regulate (i.e. gain voluntary control over and transform) the material world or their own and each other's social and mental activity. With respect to symbolic artifacts, language activity, speaking and writing, is the primary, though not exclusive, mediational means humans deploy for thinking. Human mental activity develops as a consequence of the interweaving of biological and cultural formations.

(Lantolf and Thorne, 2006)

Language is both a vehicle for conveying that which is unfamiliar to the learner and a means of stimulating, through dialogue in interaction, the existing knowledge and presenting the 'new' knowledge. In the classroom, language represents the main vehicle through which learning occurs (Wells, 1999). In particular, the talk of students in social interaction (Guk and Kellogg, 2007, Swain, 1996, Ohta, 1995, Ohta, 2000, Donato, 2004, Gutierrez, 2008, Swain, 2000) and the more 'matured' other, the teacher, are primary scaffolds in promoting the construction of new knowledge (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006, Tsui, 1995). In the language classroom there is a further consideration as to which language(s) and culture(s) are used for what purposes. There is increasing acknowledgement of the value and necessity of learners' first language in the learning of additional languages (Ellis, 1985, Canagarajah, 1995, Swain and Lapkin, 2000). A learner's first language can assist with comparison of and reflection on linguistic forms and functions, and is a more appropriate medium for expressing abstracted ideas and identity.

Mediation is more than a process of 'helping' novice learners but it is a reciprocal process in which teachers and learners mutually influence each other's actions and under-

standings (Doehler, 2002). Mediation is also an implicit process of modelling ways of learning and being. Through daily interactions, teachers and learners create the culture of learning in a particular discipline over time (Takahashi et al., 2000).

The role of the language teacher

There is a shift away from the language teacher as transmitter of a body of knowledge, to an understanding of the language teacher as the 'principal mediator' (Crozet and Liddicoat, 1999):

It is the language teacher's capacity, and responsibility, to help learners to understand others and otherness as a basis for the acquisition of cultural and communicative competence. The teacher is thus a professional mediator between learners and foreign languages and cultures...

(Byram and Risager, 1999)

The language teacher's role is reframed as:

...the quintessential go-between among various languages, cultures, generations, genders, ethnicities and historicities... someone who has acquired the ability to interact with others, be they native or non-native speakers, present or past writers, who has learned to accept other perspectives and perceptions of the word, to mediate between different perspectives and to be conscious of their evaluations of difference.

(Kramsch, 2007)

In this view, language teachers need to understand students' motivations and identifications, and model being an insider and outsider of one's own and the target culture, demonstrating to students a decentred stance (Ware and Kramsch, 2005). The language teacher needs to create a community of learners as critical observers, who contribute to shared dialogue and reflect on their language learning. It is the language teacher who knows about, operates in, connects and transforms the familiar language and culture and the target language and culture.

Teachers' work, therefore, becomes the

development of young people who are able to 'read' languages and cultures and to mediate or manoeuvre between multiple languages, cultures, identities and contexts. Furthermore, in order to do the connecting and transforming, language teachers need to be aware of their own linguistic and cultural practices as these cannot be separated from the act of teaching:

Implications and concluding comments

The shift towards a bilingual or plurilingual norm as the goal of language teaching and learning means a shift in how the role of the language teacher is understood and realised in practice. As a mediator of languages and cultures, the language teacher acts as a representative, conveying concepts and views about the existing and the new language(s) and culture(s), and about the relationship between 'self' and 'otherness'.

There are a number of pedagogical and professional challenges in this view of a language teacher. One such challenge is finding ways of integrating language and culture, both the target and students' own, and mediating the variability and contextually located nature of meaning. A further challenge is that teachers need to choose stimuli carefully and make deliberate choices about how they represent and connect the target language and culture and students' own language(s) and culture(s). In addition, this kind of teaching requires a high degree of interactivity, dialogue and opportunities to develop mutual understanding - all of which must be facilitated by the language teacher. Learning tasks and interactions need to be designed to enable students to personalise their learning and develop awareness of themselves as learners of the target language and how this contributes to their bi- or pluri-lingual identity. In all of this, a challenge for language teachers is to decentre from their own language(s) and culture(s) and recognise how an understanding of themselves can inform their teaching and enhance the resource available to students.

Intercultural language teaching and learning has emerged from within a Western education context and is, inevitably contextually bound. While such perspectives have much to offer a wider educational sphere, they will ultimately, and rightly, be interpreted from local perspectives and according to local con-

texts. The challenge for 'the East' is to engage in a dialogue with 'the West' and evaluate whether these ideas have relevance and value for transforming 'circles' and 'squares' into a unique new shape that has meaning for the local context.

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