Intercultural language teaching: principles for practice

Article · January 2004

1 author:

Anthony J. Liddicoat
The University of Warwick
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Intercultural language teaching: principles for practice

Anthony J. Liddicoat
School of Languages and Linguistics
Centre for Applied Language, Literacy and Communication Studies
Griffith University

Introduction

Culture is emerging as one of the central concerns for language teaching at the moment. However, there is a wide range of approaches to culture and to the teaching of culture as a part of language learning. This range has quite a history starting with a view of culture as literature and the arts, moving through history and institutions and on to popular culture, festivals and pastimes. All of these approaches have brought interest and depth to language teaching, but have not really come to terms with the core issue for language learners – the need to communicate in the language.

In response to this need a number of people have begun to articulate an intercultural approach to language teaching (Bolten, 1993; Byram & Zarate, 1994; Crozet, 1996, 1998; Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999, 2000; Kramsch, 1993; Liddicoat, 2002; Liddicoat & Crozet, 1997; Zarate, 1986) Intercultural language teaching places the need to communicate in first place and seeks to teach culture in a way which develops intercultural communicative skills at the same time as developing language skills. This is an approach to the teaching of culture, which sees language and culture as intimately linked and which recognises that culture is always present when we use language. While the intercultural approach to language teaching is relatively new, there are a few central ideas which characterise thinking in this area.

Intercultural language teaching and learning

An intercultural approach to language teaching and learning involves four main activities relating to culture:

- acquisition about cultures

- comparing cultures

- exploring cultures

- finding one's own 'third place' between cultures

In order to achieve these goals, intercultural approaches argue for a set of principles for developing an overall approach to teaching culture within language.

Explicit teaching of culture is a central part of language teaching

The ultimate goal of language teaching and learning is to be able to communicate in another language. Communication is not however just a question of grammar and vocabulary, it is also a question of culture (Crozet 1996). Every message a human being communicates through language is communicated in a cultural context. Cultures shape the ways language is structured and the ways in which language is used. A language learner who has learnt only the grammar and vocabulary of a language is, therefore, not well equipped to communicate in that language.

When people begin to communicate messages in another language, they not only begin to exploit language functions, they also begin to function within a cultural context. As such, learners require cultural knowledge as much as they require grammar and vocabulary. Quite often native speakers can be tolerant of problems of grammar or vocabulary, but problems of cultural mismatch often create significant problems for communication and for social relationships, largely because people are much less aware of their cultural rules for interaction than they are of other aspects of language.

Cultural knowledge is not something that learners can just pick up. In fact, cultural differences may often go unnoticed by learners until they actually create a problem (Crozet and Liddicoat 1999). If learners are going to develop their cultural knowledge about the target language group, they need to be helped to notice when their culture differs from that of others and they need to notice this before it create problems. This then is where language teachers need to use explicit teaching to draw their students' attention to culture and the ways in which varying cultures work.

Culture is integrated into other language skills not a separate skill

Kramsch (1993) has written that every time we speak we perform a cultural act and this is a very useful way to consider the relationship between language and culture. Often culture has been considered to be some sort of fifth macro-skill, which is introduced once the skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing have been established. At its most extreme, this view considers culture as something that learners will pick up by themselves when they go to the foreign country. Quite often in language text books there is a separate section reserved for culture. Quite often these 'cultural notes' section focus on aspects of culture which are not closely linked to language itself, such as festivals or arts. These notes, while interesting, are not usually the elements of culture that learners typically experience difficulty with. In fact, text books often seem to ignore cultural information which might be very important for learners in interactions with native speakers (Hanamura, 1998; Liddicoat, 1999).

Because culture is integrated closely with language, quite simple language can often be bound up with quite complex culture (Liddicoat, 1999) This is the case, for example, with things like the different ways European languages us pronouns for 'you' or Japanese uses plain, neutral or honorific verb forms. In these cases, the formal grammar involved is not exceptionally complex, but without a good understanding of the culture in which the forms are used it is impossible to use the forms correctly. Explanations that one form is more polite than another are not really helpful, because often what is involved can be a different idea of politeness (Wierzbicka, 1985).

Culture is taught from the beginning

Because culture is fundamental to language, there is a need to start teaching culture at the very beginning of language teaching. Even very simple language such as greetings, meal time formulae or the choice of a pronoun is heavily culturally laden and this needs to addressed when these aspects of language are taught. If teaching the culture is left until later, learners will have created an understanding of context for the language they are learning — an understanding they will later have to unlearn. Language is not learnt in a cultural vacuum which can be filled in later, rather learners create their own cultural assumptions as they learn. An absence of input about culture does not leave a vacant cultural space which can be filled in later. Rather, it leads to a cultural space which is filled by uninformed and unanalysed assumptions based on assumptions and understandings from the learners' first culture.

The bilingual speaker is the norm

In developing an approach to language teaching which focuses on intercultural communication, consideration needs to be given to the sort of speaker language teaching intends to create. In the past, language teaching has usually aimed at making the learner as much like a native speaker of the language as possible. This is both an unrealistic goal, in that language teaching hardly ever achieves it, and also an inappropriate one. It is inappropriate because it does not reflect the social and cultural reality of using a second language. When someone speaks in their second language, they do not abandon their own thoughts, feelings and values and assimilate themselves to the thoughts, feelings and values of their interlocutors (Byram & Zarate, 1994), instead they reach an accommodation between their own culture and personality and the new culture.

Instead of aiming for a native speaker norm, language teaching can more profitably aim for a bilingual norm: that is developing a speaker who is comfortable and capable in an intercultural context. Bilingual speakers' needs are different from those of monolinguals (Crozet, Liddicoat, & Lo Bianco, 1999; Kramsch, 1999). Bilinguals need to navigate between the languages and cultures they know and they need to create identities for themselves which work in these contexts. In order to become competent bilinguals, learners need to know what native speakers mean when they adopt certain behaviours but they do not have to reproduce these behaviours in the same way. This means teachers have to think about 'productive competence' and 'receptive competence' separately (Kasper, 1998). As receivers of language, second language users need to be able to understand what native speakers mean in native speaker-like ways. As producers of language, however, many second language users do not want to behave in native speaker-like ways, may not feel comfortable doing so, or may not need to do so.

Language learning involves intercultural exploration

To work most effectively, language learning needs to allow opportunities for learners to reflect on their own language and culture. Most learners have not had opportunities to learn about the ways in which their own culture works and how their own language reflects their culture. Without this knowledge it is difficult to come to terms with a different culture. The most important cultural learning that can come about in the language classroom is

learning that cultures are relative not absolute. Learning about another culture provides an opportunities for comparison with one's own culture and provides opportunities for learning which goes beyond the traditional aims of language learning. In situations where language learning may be too limited for learners to develop high levels of language proficiency, a deeper understanding of one's own culture and the ways in which cultures vary may be the most long-lasting outcome of language learning (Crozet et al., 1999)

Learning to continue to learn

It is true that we cannot teach everything about culture. Cultures are complex things and they vary from person to person, from group to group and over time. There is no way to transmit such a complex and dynamic thing in a classroom. What we can do in the classroom is help learners develop ways of finding out more about the culture they are learning by analysing their experiences and developing their awareness.

Intercultural competence

These ideas all raise the issue of how language competence should be described and what teaching should aim to develop. We have a number of very good descriptions of 'communicative competence' which seek to outline what language skills need to be acquired in order to communicate. However, communicative competence is not really the goal we should be aiming for. The modern language learner needs 'intercultural competence' in order to be an effective language user.

While we do not have descriptions of what intercultural competence looks like, there are some elements which clearly need to be included in the idea.

- Intercultural language users are aware that cultures are relative and that different people use language in different ways to achieve similar goals.

- Intercultural language users know some of the common cultural conventions in the language they are learning.

- Intercultural language users have strategies for learning more about culture as they interact.

- Intercutural language users have the capacity to reflect on their own linguistic behaviour and that of their interlocutors.

These sorts of knowledge and skills can be learnt best through a process of reflection in the classroom. Learners already have knowledge of their own culture, even if they are not aware of their cultural practices or able to talk about them. Language teachers can be effective in teaching culture when they allow the learners own experiences, understandings and insights a place in the language classroom. As Australian language classrooms are typically multicultural, they actually provide a very rich resource which teachers can draw on. In developing such an approach to teaching, language teachers are creating classroom in which exploration rather than repetition becomes the centre of the learners' experiences of language.

Pedagogical principles of intercultural language teaching and learning

Intercultural language learning as a classroom process focuses around five broad principles (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, & Kohler, 2003):

- Active construction: the principle that learners need to create their own knowledge about the culture as part of the development of a personal perspective on both their own culture and the culture they are learning. This means that learner's themselves need to be equipped with the necessary abilities to notice differences, reflect on the nature and impact of these and develop personal solutions to intercultural issues. The role of the teacher in active construction is to allow difference to noticed, explored and reflected on rather than presenting the culture as a complete and now body of information.

- Making connections: in intercultural language learning, students are encouraged to make their own connections between their existing culture, language and knowledge and the new stimuli they meet in the classroom. In order to do this it is important to foster a comparative perspective in which the new is compared to and contrasted with what is already known. This also means that the first culture(s) of the learners needs to be given a place in learning about other cultures.

- Social interaction: culture is learned and explored through communication with others. Social interaction allows the learner to experience difference during communication, the share perceptions and to discuss and try out possible responses. Moreover, social interaction emphasises the idea that language is learnt for communication.

- Reflection: a key part of the process of intercultural language learning is having the opportunity to reflect on experiences of difference. Student need to respond positively or negatively to the culture they are experiencing and have opportunities to acknowledge the impact that the new knowledge has on their understanding themselves and the other. They also need to reflect on the consequences of choices about their communicative behaviour in the light of their new knowledge.

- Responsibility: finally students learn that they have a responsibility for successful communication in all of their languages and for developing a perspective which values other languages, cultures and people.

These principles frame the whole teaching approach influencing choices of methodology, materials, assessment tasks, curriculum design and planning, etc.

Principles for selecting content

In developing an overall teaching approach within an intercultural framework, it is important to have a principled approach to deciding on which sorts of content are most appropriate and useful for achieving intercultural goals. Content is centrally important because a mismatch between contents elections and teaching goals can greatly undermine the effectiveness of teaching. A small set of principles can be used by teachers in

determining whether or not the materials they are working with can support an intercultural approach to teaching and learning.

- The cultural content contributes directly to developing communication or awareness of the values, attitudes, etc. of the group being studied.
- The cultural content is closely linked to language. This is particularly important as the separation of language and culture not only weakens the teaching of culture in the language classroom, but also means that culture learning interrupts language learning rather than supporting it.

- Cultural content assists in developing the relevant learning strategies and skills of noticing, comparison and reflection. This means that the material can be used for tasks that promote these skills.

- Cultural content is treated as practices with which learners engage, not as facts to be memorised.

- Cultural content allows learners to make connections between their home culture and the culture being studied.

These principles can be seen in the following examples of small classroom tasks which can be used to support intercultural language learning.

Example 1: Compliments and responses in Japanese

上田： そのイヤリングかわいい。
Ueda: *Those earrings are cute.*
小山： ありがとう。でも、これ、ずっと
　　　前に買ったの。
Koyama: *Thankyou. But I bought them a long time ago.*

本田： 日本語がお上手ですね。
Honda: Your Japanese is excellent.
マイク： いいえ、まだまだです。
Mike: *No, not yet.*

上田： きれいなお庭ですね。
Ueda: *This is a beautiful garden.*
本田： そんなことないですよ。あまり庭
　　　の手入れをしてないもんですから、
　　　雑草が生えているし…
Honda: *No it isn't. I hardly take care of it and so there are weeds…*

井上： ご主人はかんろくがありますね。
Inoue: *Your husband looks dignified.*
田中： いいえ、太っているだけですよ。
Tanaka: *No, he is just fat.*

- What do you notice that these dialogues have in common? Why might Japanese people say these sorts of things? How do you feel about the things they say? Why?
- How would you respond to these compliments in your own language? What is similar? What is different?
- If you used your way of responding to compliments, how might a Japanese person interpret your answer?

In this example, the four short dialogues provide a starting point for learning about how Japanese people give and receive compliments and the cultural material here focuses directly on a communicative situation – in particular receiving compliments, and the cultural dimension applies directly to the ways in which language is used. The tasks associated with the dialogues are associated with noticing cultural differences, comparing the same speech situation across cultures and thinking about the effects of the communication on oneself and on others. A particularly strong element in this task is that it requires the learner to decentre from his/her own cultural position and examine the perception of his/her ways of acting from another cultural framework.

Example 2: Saying goodbye in Spanish

The dialogue below is typical of what people might say at the end of a party in some parts of Latin America.

Guest:	Me voy. *I'm going.*
Host:	¿Se va? ¿Por qué? *You're going? Why?*
Guest:	Es muy tarde. *It's very late.*
Host:	No importa. Disfruta. *That doesn't matter. Enjoy yourself.*
Guest:	Pero me tengo que ir. *But I have to go.*
Host:	Pero no puedes. *But you can't.*
Guest:	Vivo lejos de aquí, y mañana tengo que levantarme temprano *I live far away and tomorrow I have to get up early.*
Host:	Hay tiempo. Tómate otro traguito. *There's time. Have another drink.*

Task 1: Noticing and Reflection: What is happening in this dialogue? How would you feel if you were the guest in this dialogue? Why would you feel this?

Task 2: Reflection: In Latin America, this dialogue would show hospitality as it shows that the host is reluctant for the guest to leave. In context this is a display of friendliness. What is happening in the dialogue which might show friendliness?

Task 3: Comparison and Reflection: How do you show friendliness to someone leaving a party? How might this appear to a person from Latin America?

This task, like the preceding one shows how people might act when communicating in an everyday situation in a different cultural context. The task is once again very closely linked to language as it is used to convey culturally contexted meanings. The tasks associated with the dialogue involve learners in noticing what is happening in a dialogue, comparing

cultural frameworks and reflecting on the language being used. This task also requires learners to decentre and to see their own culture from the perspective of the other.

Conclusion

The lage teaching profession has consistently argued that languages education is important for developing intercultural understanding. However, when language teaching has focused only on learning the language code, students have few opportunities to develop such understanding. Moreover, when cultural input is limited to isolated snippets of information about the target language culture, this too provides little opportunity for deep cultural learning. Intercultural approaches to language teaching and learning take the development of cultural understanding and the ability to use cultural knowledge to facilitate communication as primary goals for language learning, along with the development of language competence and linguistic awareness. In an intercultural approach, learners are encouraged to notice, compare and reflect on language and culture, and to develop their own understanding of their own culture as well as the culture of others. This paper has attempted to outline some of the main principles that teachers use to develop an intercultural approach in their classrooms to enhance their learners experiences of language and culture.

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