Language teachers' understanding of the role of culture in their teaching: An intercultural communicative teaching lens.  

Elba Ramirez  
e.ramirez@auckland.ac.nz  
School of Curriculum and Pedagogy, University of Auckland

Background

- I am from the Canary Islands (Spain) and my interactions with different people around the world made me realize that knowing the local language was not enough. Therefore I decided to embark on my doctorate to study the nexus between language and culture.
- In an increasingly multicultural environment, learning languages will provide global citizens with tools to overcome stereotypes and cultural shock.
- In the multi-ethnic and multilingual context of New Zealand, language teachers are expected to help students develop an intercultural capacity which the teachers themselves may lack.

Literature Review

(Key ideas informing my work)

- Languages cannot be taught putting culture aside because culture sets the context for language use and learning (Liddicoat, 2002).
- Culture shapes what people say, when and how (Liddicoat, 2002).
- Intercultural communicative competence involves five components: attitudes, knowledge, skills and awareness (Byram, 1997).
- In New Zealand, the Intercultural communicative language teaching (iCLT) framework identifies six principles to guide teachers when implementing culture in the classroom (Newton, Yates, Shearn, & Nowitzi, 2010).
- Teachers need tools to help students develop intercultural competence (Conway, Roskvist and Harvey, 2011).

Methodology and analysis

- Research Question  
  How do language teachers understand culture’s role in language teaching?
- Participants  
  8 teachers of languages  
  2 Chinese  2 Spanish  2 Japanese  2 French
- Ethics  
  The national language advisers nominated teachers for each of the international languages taught in New Zealand schools.
- Preliminary findings
  The eight teachers showed an implicit knowledge about the importance of culture in learning languages.
  However:
  1. Four teachers showed a more intercultural approach to teaching languages: 2 Chinese, 1 Spanish, 1 Japanese.
  2. Four teachers understood language and culture as two different components: 2 Chinese, 1 Spanish, 1 French.
  There seems to be a difference in the approach to teaching languages between the Asian and European languages:
  1. The teachers of Asian languages tend to approach teaching from an integrated (intercultural) perspective.
  2. The two teachers of French conceptualise language and culture separately.
  3. The Japanese and Spanish teachers with a native and high level of proficiency seem more aligned with an intercultural approach to language teaching whereas those with intermediate language level separate language from culture.

Findings: evidence from interviews

Principle 1: Integrate language and culture from the beginning
  Through greetings, verbal and non verbal language to greet, ask for and thank, to show gratitude and respect, etc.

Principle 2: Engage learners in genuine social interaction
  You don’t only learn language through speaking with a Japanese student but you learn so much more about their culture and how they speak, what kind of words they use, how they act and yeah for me it is giving as many opportunities for students to do that.

Principle 3: Encourage and develop exploratory and reflective approach to culture and culture-in-language
  Shifting focus from transmission of objective cultural knowledge (food, festivals, etc.) to exploration by learners of both visible and invisible culture (values, beliefs, etc.) to construct knowledge from experience and reflection.

Principle 4: Foster explicit comparisons and connections between languages and cultures
  Students tend to be more comfortable when they see a point (an aspect of the target culture) which allows them to compare and contrast their own culture and how different a culture is.

Principle 5: Acknowledge and respond to diverse learners and learning contexts
  Cultural and linguistic diversity among learners to explore all cultures in the classroom alongside the target one.

Principle 6: Emphasise intercultural communicative competence rather than native-speaker competence
  The native speaker is dead! The model of native speaker is an impossible goal. Every teacher is to adopt a new sociocultural identity while separating from one’s own. Having communication skills and abilities to interact with people from other cultures and with other languages is really matter.

It is really good for [my students] to see me trying to speak Chinese to the native speakers because it shows them you don’t have to be perfect to speak. They can see that the Chinese people can understand what I’m saying and understand what they’re saying.

Study

- Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from the participants.
- Data was analysed using the iCLT framework (Newton, 2010).

Next steps

- The larger study will extend to 20 participants.
- In the next stage, classroom observations and teacher reflections will provide further evidence of teachers’ practices.
- Given these initial findings, the relation between teachers’ language proficiency (in the language they teach) and interculturality will be investigated.

Implications

- The study sheds some light on the relation between language proficiency and the teachers understanding of the relation between language and culture as well as between the languages taught and the place of culture.
- More needs to be known about teachers’ understanding of interculturality if they are in charge of assisting students in developing the intercultural awareness and understandings.
- A practical outcome of this study will be to provide teachers with ideas and tools to implement an intercultural approach in their classrooms.

References


Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge all my participants for their help in making this research possible. I would like to thank my supervisors and my PhD fellows for their daily help and support. Special thanks to Verónica Genta Lain: ‘Gracias, Guechi, por mi opio’ and Dr Constanza Tolosa: ‘Milones de gracias’.