

Enhancing Language Learners' Intercultural Capability: A study in New Zealand's schools



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Enhancing Language Learners' Intercultural Capability

The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) emphasises communication and genuine social interaction as significant components of learning a language additional to the language of instruction (that is, English and/or te reo Māori and/or New Zealand Sign Language in New Zealand schools).

The communication strand is the core strand in the Learning Languages learning area through which students learn to use the target language to make meaning. It is supported by two other strands, language knowledge and cultural knowledge. The supporting language knowledge strand focuses on the structure of the target language. Communication and language knowledge together cater to learners' developing ability to make meaning with language, both fluently and accurately. These two dimensions of meaning-making inform many people's understanding of what it means to know (and be able to use) a language.

The cultural knowledge strand is an equally important supporting strand. Liddicoat (2008) argued that “[a] language learner who has learnt only the grammar and vocabulary of a language is ... not well equipped to communicate in that language.” In his view, “learners require cultural knowledge as much as they require grammar and vocabulary” (p. 278). Scarino and Crichton (2007) maintained that language users need to be “able to negotiate meanings across languages and cultures” (p. 3, our emphasis). Furthermore, the increasing diversity of backgrounds of learners and their families in New Zealand makes it important for programmes in additional languages to become means to improve student learning outcomes such as ‘intercultural capability’ – that is, increased intercultural awareness and capacity to understand and relate effectively to diversity.

In the supporting cultural knowledge strand, students learn about culture and the interrelationship between culture and language. They learn to recognise different elements of the belief systems of speakers of the target language, and become increasingly aware of the ways in which these systems are expressed through language and cultural practices. As they compare and contrast different beliefs and cultural practices, including their own, they understand more about themselves and become more understanding of others (NZC, p. 24).

At levels 1 and 2 of the NZC students will recognise that the target culture is organised in particular ways, and will make connections with their own and others' cultures. At levels 3 and 4 they will recognise and describe ways in which the target culture is organised, and will compare and contrast cultural practices.

Guiding principles

Underpinning the cultural knowledge strand are six principles of intercultural communicative language teaching (ICLT), designed to help teachers to maximise their students' intercultural learning (Newton, Yates, Shearn, & Nowitzki, 2010).

The six principles are that iCLT:

1. integrates language and culture from the beginning
2. engages learners in genuine social interaction
3. encourages and develops an exploratory and reflective approach to culture and culture-in-language
4. fosters explicit comparisons and connections between languages and cultures
5. acknowledges and responds appropriately to diverse learners and learning contexts
6. emphasises intercultural competence rather than native speaker competence.

Newton, et al. (2010, p. 4) quote Dellit (2005, pp. 26-28) who presented five guidelines for putting an interculturality-informed pedagogy into practice. Learners who are developing intercultural capability (the ability to interact proficiently with others who are from a different linguistic/cultural background) should be:

1. actively involved in constructing knowledge through exploring cultural practices
2. making connections between cultures, and between existing knowledge of culture and language, and new learning
3. involved in social interactions that involve communicating across cultural boundaries
4. reflecting critically and constructively on linguistic and cultural differences and similarities
5. taking responsibility for their intercultural growth, assisted by teachers who, for example, foster engagement with difference and awareness of stereotypes.

In essence:

Students will:	Teachers will:
1. explore	1. foster engagement with difference
2. make connections	2. raise awareness of stereotypes
3. reflect	3. help students take responsibility for their own learning

Linking to the values and key competencies

The above principles for developing intercultural capability are supported by the values and key competencies that underpin the NZC. The principles help students to value:

- innovation, inquiry, and curiosity, by thinking critically, creatively, and reflectively
- diversity, as found in different cultures, languages, and heritages
- equity and integrity
- respect for self and others.

The principles also help students to:

- think
- use language, symbols and texts
- manage self
- relate to others
- participate and contribute.

From theory to practice

Developing students' intercultural capability through language learning, in particular through the essential skills proposed by Dellit (2005), faces an immediate and significant challenge (which is heightened when teachers of languages continue to approach language learning as essentially incorporating the two dimensions of fluency and accuracy, communication and language knowledge): how can students, particularly those who are at the beginning stages of learning an additional language, develop the skills of exploration, making connections, and reflecting on differences and similarities?

Learners' knowledge of the target language is emerging. Their skills in interacting in the target language are likely to be insufficient to engage in meaningful exploratory and reflective comparison and contrast. And yet undertaking this reflective exploration in English (or whatever is the normative language of communication within the group) runs the risk of separating target language use from intercultural exploration and potentially turning an intercultural focus in the languages classroom into a social studies lesson. Such an approach also seems to bring into question how Newton, et al.'s (2010) foundational Principle 1 – that language and culture are to be integrated from the beginning – can be enacted.

Reflections on effective pedagogy

In the context of a two-year project (2016-2017) funded by the Ministry of Education through the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI), a team of five researchers worked in partnership with five primary/intermediate school teachers. Our goal was to investigate how programmes designed to fulfil the requirements of Learning Languages could enhance Year 7 and 8 school students' intercultural capability. The teachers taught a range of languages (te reo Māori, French, Chinese, Japanese), and were located in a variety of different schools across the North and South Islands. Working together with the teachers, we investigated how languages were currently taught in the partner schools. We supported the teachers as they developed independent teaching as inquiry cycles with an intercultural focus, leaving it up to the teachers to interpret what inquiry might look like in each unique context. A primary goal was to utilise the findings of their inquiries to raise issues about effective practice.

This series of five in-depth 'engaging examples of practice' outlines these teachers' journeys, with particular focus on the outcomes of their research- and theory-informed inquiries into their own practices.

The teacher partners¹

1. **Lillian** teaches Chinese in an International Baccalaureate School located in the North Island. The school has 34 different nationalities, with students from all over the world. Working alongside a Mandarin Language Assistant (MLA), Lillian facilitates three dedicated 20-minute lessons in Chinese a week for her students.

2. **Kelly**, an intermediate-level user of Chinese, has taught in two very different full primary schools in the North Island in the course of this project. The first was a low decile school where students were mostly from Pasifika and Māori backgrounds. Kelly taught Chinese once a week for 45 minutes to her Year 7/8 combined class. Kelly's current school is high-decile, with students mostly from New Zealand European and Asian backgrounds. Every classroom teacher in Years 5-8 teaches Chinese for at least 30 minutes per week. The teachers, including Kelly, are supported by an MLA.

3. **Mike** includes one hour of French per week in his programme with a Year 7 class at an intermediate school in the South Island. Mike learnt French for six months when he was at high school some years ago. More recently, he has done night classes at the Alliance Française and has completed a masters degree in computer assisted language learning.

4. **Tamara** teaches at a South Island intermediate school, with a very ethnically diverse range of students. Tamara developed te reo Māori skills initially through cultural activities, and then more formally at high school and through papers at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa. She integrates Māori language and culture across all the learning areas in her Year 8 class programme.

5. **Kathryn** teaches Japanese in an International Baccalaureate School in the North Island. Kathryn studied Japanese in high school and university. She teaches the language every six teaching days for 30 minutes to all students in her 'team' who are divided into four groups of about 32 students each.

Engaging Examples of Practice

The teacher stories we present foreground how these five primary/intermediate school teachers sought to create learning environments in which their students could safely undertake intercultural explorations in the context of learning a new language. We present these teachers' pedagogical decisions and actions, and their reflections on these. In particular, we present snapshots of their practices and pose questions for further reflection.

Through these stories, we aim to highlight the joys and struggles of real teachers in real classrooms who are seeking to enhance language learners' intercultural capability through language learning. In presenting their stories, we hope to help other teachers to consider what might be possible in their own classrooms, as well as reflect on the challenges involved.

The examples that emerge are presented as a professional learning tool and a resource to support other primary/intermediate school teachers with developing their own languages programmes and enhancing the intercultural learning outcomes of their students. There is also much to be gleaned here for teachers of languages in the secondary sector. At the end of each story we present several discussion starters for consideration and reflection.

¹Lillian is a first language speaker of Chinese; the other participants speak English as a first language.

References

Dellit, J. (2005). Getting started with intercultural language learning: A resource for schools. Melbourne, Australia: Asian Languages Professional Learning Project, Asia Education Foundation.

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Challenging Stereotypes – Videos, Pictures and Interactive Inquiry

Focus principles: genuine social interaction; exploration and reflection; comparisons and connections

Focus key competencies: thinking; relating to others; using language, symbols, and texts; participating and contributing

Context

Lillian teaches Chinese in an International Baccalaureate Intermediate School located in the North Island. With the emphasis on internationalisation expected by the IB context, languages have an important place in the school's curriculum. They are delivered in three dedicated 20-minute time-tabled slots per week. Lillian (herself a native speaker of Chinese) shares the teaching of her Chinese language classes with a Mandarin Language Assistant (MLA). Lillian has set up the class so that two lessons a week (Tuesdays and Thursdays) are taken by the MLA, and one lesson a week (Fridays) is in Lillian's hands. This distinctive working arrangement has given Lillian the space to explore a different approach in her Friday lessons, and these have become opportunities for inquiry learning cycles and an intercultural focus.

This is a Bring Your Own Device school. This helps Lillian to encourage whole class inquiries where all students can see their classmates' interactions as they take place in real time using Google Docs.

Planning the inquiry

Working with a Year 7 Chinese class, Lillian wanted her students to become more empathetic and aware of different perspectives through a process of comparing and contrasting. She set up an inquiry project whereby, through the theme of sports, she would ask her class to think about different perspectives and to challenge stereotypes. As Lillian planned this series of lessons, she was thinking to herself, "wouldn't it be interesting if I actually showed them some pictures?" These would be images of children in China enjoying sports, located from an internet search in Chinese and in English. Lillian would get her students to explore the differences. When Lillian searched for pictures in English she came up with 'unhappy' sports images, the sense of compulsion, and "competitiveness and things like that ... everything has to be in line ... I'm not seeing any games as much played in the younger generations, everything is like teams and it had to look glamorous ... everything is in order and you don't have your own thinking." She additionally located a video clip which also presented a very regulated process, with the students standing in very neat rows. There was of course the risk that Lillian was "stereotyping them myself." But searching for images in Chinese she came up with a different set of pictures which she saw as reflecting "what the Chinese would like," that is, a happier set of pictures which Lillian thought might represent how China wished to be represented to the wider world.

Inquiry in action

At the start of the lesson, Lillian gets her Google doc display ready. She asks her students to take out their own devices. She then creates a document called ‘Chinese Inquiry on Sport’. Lillian asks students what language around sports they are familiar with. Students note down on the doc anything they can remember. Everyone in the class can see words and phrases being added in real time. Lillian intervenes from time to time to keep ideas recorded. Rugby, soccer, basketball are added to the list in Chinese. Then, working in pairs, students share with each other five vocabulary items to do with sport, and one sentence. There is a lot of focused activity as students speak in Chinese to each other.

Language knowledge	What we want to find out	What have we learnt
Vocabulary Yun dong-Sports Qiu: Ball Gan lan qiu: Rugby Zu qiu: Soccer Lan qiu: Basketball Lan wang qiu: Netball Shui shang pai qiu: Water polo ping pang qiu: Table tennis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is basketball a popular sport in China? • What sports do Chinese kids play in school physical activities? • Is baseball popular sport in China? • Do they have any sport games/days in China? • What do most people that are not from China usually feel about Chinese school sport? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think that people think of the stereotype that they are forced to do sport but actually they want to do good at sport • You want their children to do well in Chinese sports. • People think that the sport teachers are strict and forcing their students to do their best.

Lillian then moves on to what she has labelled the ‘what I want to know’ section of the document. This is where her students will have the opportunity to explore, discuss and reflect on similarities and differences. Lillian shows them two short video clips about a sports day at a junior high school in China. Everything is very regulated and military. Then Lillian shows the class several pictures. One set of images has arisen from the search in Chinese, and the other from a search in English. She asks the class to think about differences between the pictures. Students discuss what they see with a partner, and then write ideas down on the Google doc. It seems the Chinese students have been forced into participating, at least with regard to the images that come up when the search is in English. “But,” asks Lillian, “is that the whole picture? How do we know the reality is broader? Do you have Chinese friends? Do you talk to them? What do you think the Chinese want people to think about sport in China?”

In the next lesson, Lillian continues her inquiry. She prompts her students, “what do most people that are not from China usually see about school sport?” Lillian then sets the particular inquiry question for the session - “What do most people from China want others to feel about school sports?” Students discuss this question in pairs. Students are very focused, and begin jotting down ideas in the Google doc. Lillian moves from group to group to help keep students on track and to field questions.

Towards the end of the lesson Lillian brings the group together to share ideas. One student volunteers that it seems that Chinese want people to think they are really good at sport. Another suggests that people from China want others to think that they are not forced to do it. Students then move into groups of three or four. The next questions for inquiry are: “do all schools in China do sports in this way? How do you know? What makes you think that?” Lillian is challenging the stereotype of ‘forced, routined, rigid’. Students discuss the question together and carry out their own independent internet searches.

Reflecting on the inquiry

As Lillian thought about what she wanted her students to get out of the inquiry, she was aware that she wanted them to notice how orderly everything was. As she reflected on the differences that were emerging between the sets of images, she noted “I think it links deeper into them being a communist country ... I think it is very ordinary for the schools in China to want everything to be regulated.” But she also wanted her students to think “are all Chinese schools like that?” She “wanted them to be able to see that you don’t really identify a group of people as one culture,” but rather as representing a range of perspectives. Thus, “the main point I want the kids to know is that you are not locked up in one culture.” There may be many reasons behind why people act the way they do, and it was important to get her students actually to start thinking about that. She conceded, “I don’t think anyone has asked them those questions before,” but she explained, “that’s me trying to link back into Principle 3.”

As Lillian reflected on how successful she thought the inquiry was, she commented that she liked how her students were responding to the sessions. Lillian found that the students were “definitely a lot more engaged” than when it was just teaching them the language. Lillian was mindful that perhaps this intercultural reflection was “kind of brushing it on the surface,” but this might be “good in itself because I don’t think they’ve ever been asked questions that are like this.” She was aware that, through the prompting and reflection, her students were beginning to notice, and “they can actually say to me ‘well, you know, my friend so and so is from China, they don’t celebrate this and also they don’t do things in certain ways like that.’”

She could see from their discussions that the boys in particular were “really engaged” and “starting to think about all of this.” The girls seemed less so - “the vibe”, as she called it, had definitely switched from the language lessons (Tuesdays and Thursdays), where the girls were more interactive, to the intercultural lessons (Fridays) where it seemed to become the boys’ turn to get more involved. She reflected that perhaps this was because sports was perceived as more of a topic of interest for boys, but she also had to recognise that this was perhaps a case of “me stereotypically thinking that the boys like sports more.”

Lillian concluded, “I think they have taken away with them that there are different perspectives at looking at things.” She commented:

I do fully support that [this] is what language is all about. It’s not just about teaching how to say it, the structure, but it is actually seeing the bigger picture. And I think from my understanding of the different schools that I’ve been in, nobody looks at it from that perspective.

Challenges in practice

A challenge for Lillian was how to weave all of this intercultural inquiry into the language learning itself. Because the other two lessons in the weekly series are co-taught with an MLA and have a more specific language focus, this made the Friday lessons quite distinct from the other two. This did give Lillian the opportunity to revise and recap previously encountered language input, with the Friday sessions providing opportunities for inquiry into aspects emerging from the language, but this did also seem to create a separation that she was mindful of.

Despite the challenges in practice, Lillian had in fact become quite excited by the opportunity to introduce an intercultural reflective element into her language lessons. As the lead teacher for languages in her school, she commented, “I have introduced it to my entire staff.” That is, “I’ve introduced them to the Newton principles and we’re going to look into how, as a whole school, we can do this.” She reflected, “personally, I think this can take away a lot of fear that teachers have in language teaching.” She perceived that this apprehension came from a belief that “you have to be fluent in the language ... [and] that you can only teach vocab, grammar of the language.” She conceded, “it shouldn’t really be that hard.” The Newton principles had expanded her thinking to recognise that there was a whole lot more to it than just words and phrases. This example of practice illustrates the fact that teachers can do the intercultural work through a student-focused inquiry process. Lillian was now starting to tell other staff about it and getting them on board.

Final lessons learned

As Lillian reflected back on what she had experienced during the two years of the project, she concluded that “Inquiry Learning is a great way to teach students the culture of the language they are learning.” She commented that, through the interactions she would have with her class “in the actual moment of teaching,” she could really sense her students’ minds being broadened regarding the culture of the target language. Nevertheless, although she would like to continue to have opportunities where she could teach languages through inquiry, giving equal weight to language and culture presented a challenge that she had been unable to resolve to her satisfaction.

Discussion starters: a focus on getting students to explore

In this story **genuine social interaction** is encouraged, albeit in English. Through sharing ideas in real time through a Google doc, the class engages in **exploration and reflection**, and **comparisons across cultures**. To what extent do you think this inquiry was successful? To what extent do you think it could work in your own classroom?

Lillian expresses concern about limited integration between language and culture. How much of a concern do you think this needs to be? How do you think greater integration between language and culture could be achieved through the topic of sports?

Lillian is also concerned to challenge stereotypes. What kinds of risks are there in these kinds of inquiries to embed stereotypical thinking? How might those risks be managed?

References (two useful video resources)

A day in a life of a primary school in China*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=53erm2MFrVc>

A day of Chinese high school students: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKtIVBkCHoQ>

Key Resource

Newton, J., Yates, E., Shearn, S., & Nowitzki, W. (2010). Intercultural Communicative Language Teaching: Implications for effective teaching and learning - a literature review and an evidence-based framework for effective teaching. Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Education.

Martin East was the author of this Engaging Example of Practice.

*The original BBC video used by Lillian is currently unavailable.



Focus principles: genuine social interaction; exploration and reflection; comparisons and connections

Focus key competencies: thinking; relating to others; using language, symbols, and texts; participating and contributing

Context

In the first year of the project Kelly, a teacher of Chinese, worked in a low decile full primary school in the North Island, and integrated Chinese into her mainstream Year 7/8 class for 45 minutes a week. Since the project's second year, Kelly has been teaching at a high decile full primary school, also located in the North Island. The school's additional language policy expects every Year 5 to 8 teacher to teach Chinese at least once weekly for 30 minutes. Teachers are offered professional learning and development opportunities for teaching and learning Chinese and the school currently has a Mandarin Language Assistant.

Kelly considers herself a low-intermediate-level user of Chinese, who is still learning the language and recently had the opportunity to go to Beijing on a three-week scholarship, her only experience of going to China. She draws predominantly on a task-based approach with an emphasis on formulaic expressions (see East, 2012, Chapter 3). A typical lesson might include a song, a game and a task that involves as much interaction as possible in Chinese. At the beginning of the project, Kelly was integrating only small aspects of Chinese culture into her teaching programmes, and, by her own admission, “very superficially and without much thought.”

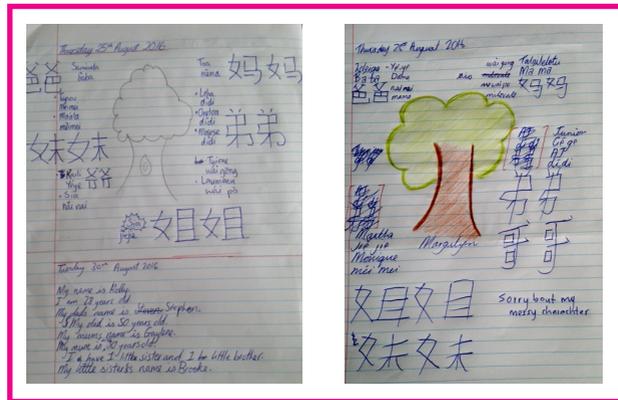
The inquiry

In her inquiry, Kelly wanted her students to learn about, and reflect upon, values and beliefs important to Chinese people in comparison to their own. To achieve her inquiry goal she used as foundations the topics of ‘family’ and ‘daily student life’ (first year of project), and ‘colour’ and ‘fashion’ (second year of project).

Inquiry in action

One lesson within the topic of ‘family’ focuses on ‘siblings’. This is a class of mostly Pacific Island students. Kelly sees this as providing rich opportunities for intercultural reflection, comparison and contrast. Her practice demonstrates alternation between Chinese and English. After revising family-related vocabulary, the students apply the vocabulary in a game called Memory, using only Chinese. For the memory activity, each table group has cards on the table, facing down. Kelly explains, “when turning a card over, you must say the word in English and in Mandarin [Chinese].” Kelly gives an example, and then, with instructions in Chinese, students have ten minutes to complete the memory game. Kelly moves around the room to support students. She responds to questions about how to pronounce words, and also reminds the students to listen to each other and speak, using the words (all this is done in Chinese).

After the game, Kelly switches to English for the cultural exploration. Her cultural focus is on family size. She tells her students about China’s ‘one-child policy’, the differences in application in urban and rural areas, and the preference for boys. Following this, the whole class undertakes a survey, in Chinese, on the number and gender of everybody’s siblings. This is challenging for some students due to the amount of language involved. The class comes together at the end of the lesson to share the results of the survey and take part in a discussion about the concept of ‘family’.



Sample of students’ family tree

In a subsequent lesson the class spends the first few minutes recapping what they know about the ‘one child’ policy. Then they discuss how family life might be different for an only child in China. Kelly uses as an example the boy from a homestay family she had stayed with during the previous year. Students share words and phrases such as ‘boring’, ‘lonely’, ‘could be spoilt’, ‘shy’ and ‘they have no one to look up to’. For Kelly, these words demonstrate her students’ understanding of their own families as being “quite different - chaotic, noisy and often with lots of adults.” A student asks what the boy did for fun. The class nods when hearing that he kept himself occupied with cards, toys and video games, hobbies not too dissimilar to their own. Kelly notes that her students “were doing a good job at noticing the similarities and differences between this boy’s life and their lives.”

Another lesson within this topic focuses on the role of grandparents in China. After an initial revision of family vocabulary, Kelly talks about the members of her own family in Chinese while the students write down their understanding of it in English. Using a family tree, Kelly then moves to the intercultural focus. Kelly explains that names for grandparents differ in China depending on whether they belong to the mother’s or the father’s side of the family. She introduces pronunciation, pinyin and the characters for such terms, adding them to the family tree, particularly highlighting the character formation. This ‘culture-in-language’ episode is presented to the students in English. In the final phase of the lesson, the students complete their own family tree and write about their families using Kelly’s description of her own family as a model.

Reflections on the inquiry

Kelly wanted to inquire into ways to raise her students’ awareness of family similarities and differences between China and New Zealand. Reflecting on her inquiry, Kelly identified two issues. One issue was her perceived lack of knowledge as a non-native Chinese speaker and therefore, culturally, being an ‘outsider’. She explained, “I actually found it quite difficult when they started asking questions.” This was because she was “not an expert on it” and was “trying to learn the cultural information as I go.”

Another issue related to what Kelly perceived as the challenging nature of intercultural reflection. For example, the ‘one-child policy’ was “actually quite a controversial subject” and there were certain aspects that she did not want to explore, such as “the way many Chinese aborted young girls.” Kelly implicitly addressed this issue when she talked about the wanted child being a boy. However, she did not confront her students regarding the unbalanced gender-ratio and thought that topics like abortion would “not have been discussed with them before.” This meant that Kelly ended up “skirting around” some issues that she was not comfortable talking to the class about. This avoidance led Kelly to consider whether she really did exploit the intercultural aspects of the ‘one child policy’ deeply enough.

Kelly also explained another challenging learning and teaching episode that arose when looking at the topic of ‘family’.

As part of the series of lessons, Kelly created a short questionnaire that the students could take home to complete with their own families. She planned to use their responses to help them make connections or notice similarities between ‘family’ as conceptualised in China and in New Zealand. When asked how they would define a family, the students supplied what she saw as typical responses - ‘a group of people that look after you’, ‘people that love you’, ‘something you cherish’ and ‘friends’.

However, when Kelly posed the question “How would you describe your family?” she received several unanticipated responses. A few students used words like ‘lazy’, ‘ugly’, ‘harsh’, ‘disrespectful’, ‘rough’. Their responses left Kelly feeling, in her words, “uncomfortable” and “unprepared.” However, this became part of Kelly’s own intercultural

learning. Kelly “had assumed that they were going to give me answers that I could relate to and make connections with.” She came to realise that “despite being from the same place, people can have very differing perspectives on the world and themselves.” This could make iCLT “confronting”. She reflected:

It occurred to me that through intercultural teaching and applying Newton’s principles to my language teaching practice, I thought I was trying to teach my students how similar we all are throughout the world. It also made me realise that defining something like ‘family’ through a cultural lens is very difficult. Every individual with every culture has a different worldview and perspective on family. The discussion made me realise that my focus should instead be on reflecting on just how different we are and how that is not a bad thing.

Other challenges in practice

Kelly also recognised the challenge of **trying to avoid a stereotypical view on culture**. She commented, “sometimes I just found it hard not knowing how far to go culturally because there are so many stereotypes out there.” This made her “worried about giving wrong information.” While she acknowledged that intercultural pedagogy should not focus on stereotypes, Kelly pointed out that they did exist. Although she was not sure how to address them, she acknowledged that they needed to be addressed, because, unless they were discussed, the students’ perceptions would not change.

A final challenge Kelly identified was that of **balancing language and cultural learning**. She felt she did not have as much time to focus on character learning or sentence structures as she had in previous years. She felt that the focus on intercultural knowledge seemed to have come at the cost of language input. Even though “cultural targets went up,” Kelly explained that “because I was discussing a lot of cultural stuff in English I felt personally that my language targets went down a little bit.” She estimated her target language (TL) input at 80% prior to the project, compared to just 50% when she included the cultural focus. Although she conceded that she could have prepared intercultural aspects in Chinese, she felt that this would have been beyond the students’ capabilities and more Chinese input about culture “would take away” some of the deeper student reflections. Nonetheless, she questioned whether her students would behave or think differently about Chinese people, and conjectured that such an effect could perhaps only be observed after a longer period of instruction.

Lessons learned

At the end of the entire project, Kelly was invited to reflect on her own personal journey, and the lessons she had learned as a consequence of her participation. With regard to shifts in her teaching, Kelly noted, “my lessons during the last two years have featured more whole class discussions where we reflect on the similarities and differences between two cultures in an effort to increase our knowledge and understanding of others.” Nevertheless, it was “difficult at times to integrate key ideas about the Chinese culture and that of New Zealand.” Kelly identified several reasons for this:

First, I believe that the depth of my knowledge of Chinese culture is limited due to being a foreigner and a non-native speaker of the language. I do not wish to inaccurately portray the Chinese culture due to my inexperience. Second, the reflection of one’s own culture is difficult and my students initially struggled. The idea of what ‘culture’ is and the process of reflection can be challenging, particularly as a kid. I know they had been asked to share cultural and linguistic knowledge before, but am unsure if they had ever been asked how much they actually know or understand about their own culture. What can you say about the culture of New Zealand when we are so diverse with our ethnic backgrounds?

Kelly sums up her own developmental journey like this:

My language teaching practice at the end of this project has developed to include an emphasis on the teaching of both language and culture. I still include a lot of discussion and reflection on diversity and endeavour to make and use tasks that include an aspect of cultural knowledge. This project has reminded me that my language teaching practice can and must change every year depending on the children in my class to effectively meet their learning needs - just like how it does in all of the other areas of the curriculum.

In the future I imagine my practice to be similar to how I currently teach, but hopefully I will have more confidence in two ways. First, I will have more confidence in my language abilities in Mandarin due to further study and experience. I would like to try to include more Mandarin through classroom instructions and formulaic expressions to increase my use of the TL once again as I feel this is of huge benefit to the students. Second, I hope to be more confident in increasing students’ awareness of Chinese culture, and the opportunity to actively reflect upon their own culture. I imagine that I will still discuss the comparisons and contrasts evident between languages and cultures, and this will hopefully get easier over time.

Discussion starters

Kelly experienced challenges when attempting to explore the concept of ‘family’ through a cultural lens. What challenges can you think of that might arise when exploring what might seem to be straightforward concepts?

Both Kelly and her students realised that it is not always easy to reflect on your own culture and that sometimes we are not aware of our own cultural perceptions, values or beliefs. How might learners be supported to become more aware of their own implicit perceptions, values and beliefs?

Kelly is concerned that she, as an ‘outsider’, does not have enough cultural knowledge and understanding to teach others about the target culture. She worries that, because of her lack of knowledge, she might introduce her students to cultural stereotypes. Do you think this is a legitimate concern? What do you think about introducing/avoiding stereotypes?

How might you address stereotypes if they come up?

Kelly is attempting to balance language and culture, but feels that, at times, one comes at the cost of the other. How might you find a balance between the two? Where do you think your priorities should lie when teaching the target language? Are you aware of your reasons for holding these priorities? How important do you think it is to teach about culture and intercultural understanding in the target language? What strategies could you use to approach culture in the target language?

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Key Resource

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Christine Biebricher was the author of this Engaging Example of Practice.

Guiding Intercultural Exploration through Resources and Questions

Focus principles: exploration and reflection; comparisons and connections.

Focus key competencies: (critical) thinking; relating to others; using language, symbols, and texts

Context

Mike teaches French as a mainstream teacher with a Year 7 class at a South Island intermediate school. The school is traditional in its organisation, with each teacher working in their own classroom with 25 to 30 students. All the teachers at Mike's school are expected to teach a language other than English, but, beyond that expectation, there is complete autonomy regarding which languages are taught and how. For Mike, teaching a language was something that "started as a subject I was required to teach that I had little skill, experience or enthusiasm for." However, during his 15 years as a teacher, Mike has taken advantage of language professional learning and development opportunities and states that language teaching is now "a major focus and strength of my weekly programme."

Mike describes his French proficiency as being low-intermediate, and he admits he still lacks confidence when speaking French. At the beginning of this project, Mike revealed that he was somewhat nervous about introducing a cultural element into his language teaching. As he put it: "I was concerned that I could be repeating and enforcing stereotypes, and this could have the opposite effect of the goal of intercultural language teaching." Mike was also concerned that a cultural element could detract from what he saw as the main focus of his language programme - language learning.

Planning the inquiry

One of the intercultural language teaching/learning tenets that particularly resonated with Mike was the importance of making explicit comparisons and connections between cultures and languages (Newton, et al.'s Principle 3). Mike saw the potential of using "culturally rich resources" and then "directing [the students] to make their own conclusions," as a way to remove the need for him to be "a cultural expert" and avoid passing on his own possible stereotypes. The key to this, and a significant departure from Mike's previous approach, was what he termed "intelligent questioning." By this, Mike meant that questions would be "planned and thorough," and would come "all the way through [lessons] rather than just a wee block at the end."

Having observed that his students seemed more naturally inclined to notice differences than similarities, Mike's primary intercultural goal for his inquiry was for his students to understand and appreciate commonalities as well as differences between cultures. Using the French school system as a linguistic and intercultural context, he sourced a range of authentic cultural resources from the internet to bring French culture into his classroom during two half-hour lessons per week. These included a poem, an article,

brief video clips, and a school timetable. Mike noted that the topic aligned well with his intended language foci for the term, which included time, dates, and expressing likes and dislikes. It was also something he felt his students would be “genuinely quite interested in.”

Having completed his planning for the inquiry, Mike was “quite enthusiastic” about getting underway. However, despite this keenness, he still wondered whether spending time on culture would detract from the language learning, and whether the language in the authentic resources might prove to be too challenging for his beginner learners.

Inquiry in action

Mike’s inquiry began on the first day of Term 2, by which time his students had already learned some basic French vocabulary, including greetings and numbers. Mike played a video clip of a French student reciting a poem about returning to school after the summer break (French Today, 2011).* The students listened and then read along in French. Mike asked the class to compare the young French student’s thoughts with their own ideas about returning to school after the holidays. This served to introduce the topic and activate the students’ schema for the inquiry. Over the next few lessons, the class watched some short videos of French students describing their school day, extended their number knowledge and fluency, and learned to tell the time in French.

The vocabulary focus of one of the lessons was ‘days of the week’. The students were each given a French school timetable (Loescher Editore, 2010, 0.18sec)* and asked to translate it. They were able to quickly work out most of the subjects, and, with some prompting, they also decoded some other words. Mike planned initially to ask the students a series of



French student reciting a poem

factual questions based on the information in the timetable, but the lesson took a slightly different course because “the students were fascinated about several differences and wanted to discuss [them] immediately.” They compared the French school week with their own, focusing particularly on the length of the school day and having ‘free periods’. Mike guided the students to also look for similarities, and probed to elicit the students’ thoughts and feelings about the differences and commonalities. This led to a lively discussion about which system the students would prefer if they were able to choose, and which they thought French students might prefer.

Towards the end of the lesson, Mike returned to his original plan and asked the students questions (in English) to test their reading and understanding of the timetable. Given their very beginner status, he expected the students to answer in English, and most did.

However, after two students spontaneously tried to answer in French, others followed their lead. The final questions were all answered in French. Mike stated that in his experience, “this is rare.”

In a later lesson, Mike introduced formulaic phrases for expressing likes and dislikes. He reused the French school timetable as a resource for this lesson, as it was something the students were already familiar with and were “quite interested in.” In the process of reviewing the students’ understanding/memory of the vocabulary in the timetable, Mike also talked about the origin of some of the words – linking Monday/lundi with moon/lunar, for example. This piqued some students’ interest further, and prompted additional questions and animated discussion. The students were then asked to write sentences in French expressing their likes and dislikes, and they moved around, sharing these orally with their classmates.

When planning this lesson, Mike had anticipated the students would use subjects from the timetable for their likes and dislikes. However, a number of students became more creative, stating, for example, je n’aime pas lundi (I don’t like Monday), j’aime récré (I like break time), and j’aime 15.00h (I like 3.00pm – i.e. when school finishes for the day). Some students also drew on language from previous lessons, and some asked for words they

temps	lundi	mardi	mercredi	jeudi	vendredi	samedi
1 8 - 9 h	anglais	X	X	français	français	anglais
2 9 - 10 h	technologie	français	X	histoire	EPS	biologie
3 10 - 11 h	maths	géographie	X	dessin	EPS	français
11 - 11.30 h	récré			récré		
4 11.30 - 12.30 h	français	anglais	X	maths	géographie	technologie
12.30 - 14 h	déjeuner		X	déjeuner		
5 14 - 15 h	histoire	éducation civique	X	biologie	X	X
6 15 - 16 h	EPS	X	X	musique	maths	X
7 16 - 17 h	EPS	maths	X	X	anglais	X

French school timetable

hadn’t yet learned in French – words for sports they played and things they did on the weekend, for example. A few students who were sometimes more reluctant to participate also engaged enthusiastically with this activity and shared their ideas with the full class.

Reflecting on the inquiry

As Mike reflected on the impact of the inquiry, he was particularly mindful of the increases he had observed in his students’ motivation for language learning. Mike attributed his students’ increased engagement and interest, at least in part, to the “relevant, authentic and engaging context” that the intercultural focus provided. The changes in motivation extended beyond the students. Mike confessed that he found the intercultural focus had also increased his own curiosity and interest, and was reinvigorating. Indeed, the intercultural resources and discussions removed a burden Mike had felt “to be an expert,” and provided a platform for him to continue learning alongside his students. As the inquiry progressed, Mike realised that his initial concern about the language in the authentic resources being too challenging for his students was

“unfounded.” Instead, he observed that “the authentic context aided comprehension and students enjoyed the challenge of ‘decoding’ the resources.” One of the students confirmed this, remarking that he liked “hearing other people who are native speakers. It doesn’t matter if you don’t know all the words – you go on what you know.”

Mike also noticed that his students appeared to remember a lot of the language they had previously learned quite quickly. He attributed this to the learning “having been put into a more solid cultural context.” He also commented that, at times, the students engaged with resources in ways that he hadn’t planned for or foreseen. In the first lesson using the school timetable, for example, some students worked out how many hours the French students were in class over a whole week; this was something Mike said he “hadn’t even thought of doing,” but it added richness to the class discussion.

Mike’s apprehension that the inclusion of a cultural dimension would reduce language learning also turned out to be unfounded. He noted that, even though he was spending less time on explicit language teaching, the students “are actually picking up the same amount.” He reported there was also more evidence of the students “wanting to give the language ‘a go.’” Material that was initially introduced as a ‘cultural resource’ sometimes became a springboard for his students to use more target language in the lessons, and to go beyond what they were explicitly taught. Mike was sometimes surprised at his students’ additional vocabulary, including some quite obscure words, although he wondered if perhaps in the past there hadn’t been opportunities for his students to demonstrate what they did know. He also noticed that, in contrast to previous years, “the students’ language usage was fun and adaptive ... they were trying to communicate.”

Mike was also aware that, in comparison to his earlier language lessons, his questioning had evolved. Whereas before, cultural questioning and discussion came at the very end of lessons, if at all, deeper reflective questioning had now become a more integral and planned part of Mike’s language classes. His students were very interested in the differences between their lives and those of similar aged students living in France. But Mike also wanted them to realise that “culture is more complex than just a couple of generalisations.” Thoughtful questioning helped him guide his students to “discuss these new things.”

Challenges in practice

Mike’s first intercultural inquiry (which he undertook the year before this one) used the theme of food as a context. An initial challenge he encountered was the time it took on the internet to source the authentic resources he wanted. Mike confessed that this contributed to him feeling a little overwhelmed when he set out to plan for the current inquiry. However, looking back, he was surprised at the extent to which “it was actually much faster and more efficient this time.” It had taken him less than a day to locate an interesting range of resources and complete the planning. Mike speculated that the choice of topic may have been a factor in this, although he also pointed out that having done one inquiry,

“I now know what I’m looking for.” Based on his experiences the previous year, Mike was also more confident to reuse the culturally rich resources with different language or intercultural goals – something that made planning “much more manageable.”

Final lessons learned

As he looked back on the whole project, Mike recalled that he began the project “with an open mind and a willingness to try something different.” However, he also remembered being very concerned about the risk that intercultural communicative language teaching (iCLT) would turn language learning into a social studies lesson and reduce language learning opportunities. Based on the inquiry described above, Mike now feels assured that this need not be the case.

In the process of exploring ways to enhance his students’ intercultural understandings, Mike had thought deeply about his pedagogy. He pointed out that he now finds it easier to agree with the framework presented in the *New Zealand Curriculum* whereby *language knowledge* and *cultural knowledge* interweave to support the *communication* strand. He explained:

I now believe simply iCLT is good teaching. Basing lessons in an authentic context, having a bigger picture, making lessons relevant to learners, allowing students room to explore, challenging their pre-existing ideas and asking for their point of view are all tenets of good constructivist teaching.

While emphasising that he was “not throwing the baby out with the bath water,” Mike concluded that he was quite comfortable with iCLT – “it suits me, so I’m going to keep on doing it.

Discussion starters: a focus on getting a balance

In this story, the students tended to be drawn more instinctively to notice differences between themselves and others. How important do you think it is to guide them to discuss similarities as well? Why?

One of Mike’s initial concerns was that introducing intercultural noticing and reflection could encroach on the time available for language teaching – and, by implication, for language learning. To what extent do you think this would be an issue in your own class?

Mike was also concerned that, with an intercultural focus, his language classes might become more like Social Studies lessons. How would you describe the distinction between intercultural language learning and Social Studies? What sorts of things might need to be done (or avoided) to prevent this happening?

Mike speculated that the ‘context’ of this inquiry – that is, the French school system –

played a part in his students' increased engagement. What other contexts, or topics, do you think might be similarly motivating for Year 7/8 students?

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Key Resource

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Jocelyn Howard was the author of this Engaging Example of Practice.

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Integrating Language and Culture through Games



Focus principles: integration of language and culture; genuine social interaction; comparisons and connections

Focus key competencies: relating to others; using language, symbols, and texts

Context

Tamara teaches **Te Reo Māori** (Māori language) as an integral part of her programme with a Year 8 class at an intermediate school in the South Island. All the students at Tamara's school learn a language other than English, although, with the programmes based on each teacher's interest and expertise, there is wide variability in the languages taught and the approaches used. While she is a first language speaker of English, Tamara identifies strongly as Māori (her father's heritage). She has beginner-survival level ability in te reo Māori, and is continuing to learn Māori language and tikanga (values and practices). She also knows some basic French (from high school), Samoan (her mother's heritage), and New Zealand Sign Language (personal interest), and uses smatterings of all these languages as she teaches. Tamara and her students also learn Korean with a native speaker for 40 minutes each week.

Tamara emphasises that she is "hugely passionate about te ao Māori – the Māori world." She brings this into her classroom by "embedding Māori across the curriculum" so that "it becomes part of everyday things." For example, Māori words for colours are used in descriptive writing, and Māori flax kites provide the context for a science investigation into flight. For Tamara, "any subject that you are teaching – there is always a [Māori] component you can weave in." Having had very little language teaching pedagogy when she did her teacher education, this approach is based on Tamara's own beliefs, rather than any particular language teaching theory. With regard to enhancing intercultural appreciation, Tamara is aware that her class is "quite eclectic in terms of backgrounds, ethnicities, and what the students actually identify [as]." Thinking back to the beginning of this project, Tamara recalled: "I was nervous, as my approach is definitely not the 'norm'

when it comes to teaching languages.” She was somewhat reassured, then, when she found she could make “instant connections” between the way she teaches and some of the Newton, et al. (2010) intercultural principles that underpin the inquiries in this project.

Planning the inquiry

Tamara wanted to focus her inquiry on the integration of language and culture (Newton, et al.’s Principle 1). She also stressed that, for her, making connections (Principle 4) was hugely important. Tamara wanted to do more than just encourage her students to compare and contrast different cultures. She also encouraged them to construct personal connections with Māori words, and she would use te ao Māori concepts to help her students to make connections with each other within their diverse class and school setting. Tamara chose te ao kori (the world of movement) as the intercultural theme for her inquiry. This connected to the science investigation the class had been doing on flight, and would also link to the New Zealand bird focus that she had planned for later in the year. The class enjoyed being outdoors, and Tamara was comfortable with “using reo through P.E.,” so she identified two traditional Māori games (kī-o-rahi and tapu ae) that could be used as contexts to extend her students’ understandings of Māori culture, and practise new vocabulary. The PE context enabled her to “physically demonstrate what the kupu (word) is,” and could also “act as an excellent prompt for the students.” Her goal was to have her learners “being able to use Māori without realising that ‘I’ve used Māori’ – so making it a normal everyday thing.”

Kī-o-rahi and tapu ae also had rich potential as foundations for discussions about games and activities that have origins in other cultures – something Tamara planned for. In addition, she planned to make use of resources produced for the recent national Māori Language Week, which focused on phrases to inspire people and cheer them on. Tamara also recognised that, through the inquiry, she could maintain a focus on developing key competencies, particularly ‘relating to others’. However, with only second-hand knowledge herself of how kī-o-rahi and tapu ae are played, she needed to enlist help to introduce the games to her students.



Field set-up for traditional Māori

Inquiry in action

When the inquiry began, Tamara’s class was already underway with an independent ‘ladder’ challenge to learn a set of kiwaha (colloquial expressions). These included sports side-line encouragements, such as Hopukina! (Catch it!), Ānana! (That’s it), and Ka mau te wehi! (That’s outstanding!). A few of the students carried flashcards to help reinforce these new phrases. Other Māori words and phrases were on the walls and on objects around the classroom.

For the first lesson, Tamara arranged for a traditional Māori games facilitator, Julie (pseudonym), to teach the class how to play kī-o-rahi. Tamara explained: “the story behind kī-o-rahi is all about taniwha (powerful creatures) and hunting and things like that. It’s based on a Māori perception of how creatures move.” Julie’s explanation of the taniwha myth then provided a cultural context for how the game evolved. As they played, the students had opportunities to use the kiwaha they had been learning.

Tamara started the next lesson with some kiwaha on the whiteboard as a reminder for students before they headed outside to where cones were set out to play tapu ae. Julie made cultural links as she explained that the game is related to Māori warfare. Interspersing Māori words in her English explanations, she described how, just as with Māori at war, there are defenders and attackers and runners (each with a particular area on the field), and how, during pā (fortified village) wars, the warriors would protect their women and babies (represented by tennis balls on small upturned cones within a circle at each end of the playing area).



Cones set out to play tapu ae.

As a warm up, the class followed the instructions that Julie gave in a mix of English and Māori, slapping their thighs and clapping hands to a Māori chant. Julie continued seamlessly ‘peppering’ her English explanation with Māori words as she went through the rules for tapu ae. The students and Tamara played the game enthusiastically, passing the ball through each third of the court and trying to knock the ‘babies’ out of their ‘nests’. Mostly they used English as they called out to their team-mates, with some occasional bursts of Māori, such as “Oma, oma!” (Run/escape!), and Ānana!

The intercultural focus on te ao kori continued in the next lesson, with a discussion of the movements in a range of activities, including Irish dancing, Siva Tau (Samoan war dance), and striking a piñata. Tamara introduced the Māori words for ‘left’ and ‘right’ to help students describe some of the movements. She continued her cross-curricular approach

as she taught the students some yoga poses with “a Māori spin”; the ‘flower pose’ became the ‘putiputi pose’, and links were made between the sacredness of the head for Māori people and in some other cultures. The discussion expanded to how the yoga poses “can actually affect your hauora (wellbeing)” and “all the different ‘well-beings’ there are.”

The next lesson was preceded by a short karate session with visiting teachers - part of a whole school ‘taster’ programme. Tamara capitalised on this as an opportunity for further intercultural exploration and reflection. The students were prompted beforehand to recall Māori words they could use during karate. When they returned to class, the students discussed links between karate moves and the movements in yoga and the Māori games they had played. Māori words for prepositions of place (e.g., roto/inside, muri/behind, mauī/left) were sometimes interwoven into the students’ discussions.

Reflecting on the inquiry

Tamara’s main focus had been on integrating language and culture in the context of playing games. This included looking at “the values behind why Māori had these games” and “the purpose behind them,” and then “a little bit of the tikanga and the culture and ... relating it back to childhood games that the kids had played.” For Tamara, this was about “how you can actually get language in there without the kids realising.” She explained that the students were “drawing on everything” and “making connections.” In other words, rather than treating te reo Māori as a discrete subject in an allotted time, it became “part of our kaupapa ... part of what we do. Tamara believed that this “normalisation” of Māori would lead to her students’ language learning being “almost like an osmosis thing.” Indeed, some of the students appeared to be aware that Māori words were being seamlessly embedded into all their learning. One student reported: “We don’t even really know we are doing it because we are using it so much.”

In terms of the students’ engagement with diversity and relating to others, Tamara noted that the games had provided opportunities for genuine social interactions that incorporated te reo Māori. She also perceived that the students were making connections between what they were doing in Māori and people from a range of different cultures. This might include people from other cultures within the class, or connecting more to students’ own heritage and extended families.

Tamara was mindful to take care that her intercultural provocations were not just related to Māori. She had often probed and made links across a wide range of cultures and perspectives. She was able to exemplify some ‘aha’ moments as her students were prompted to reflect on pre-conceived ideas. One of these occurred when the yoga poses were taught with Māori names. She recalled some of the students “had this stereotype that yoga was for Indian people or mums in tights.” Tamara could see that, through the intercultural focus, the class reflected on ideas that they might otherwise not have engaged with. She concluded that “looking at things differently” was a key thing she had achieved with her class during the inquiry.

Challenges in practice

A significant challenge for Tamara – and one that she has in common with many other teachers of languages in primary schools in New Zealand – is that she is teaching a language and culture which she is still learning herself. She is very open about this with her students. In fact, they are very willing helpers. As a need arises during lessons, students often look up a word Tamara may not know, usually doing this quickly and without necessarily being asked. However, Tamara’s beginner-survival level of proficiency in the target language means that her students are not being regularly exposed to extended stretches of input in te reo Māori. Additionally, most of their input is oral, and the written form is somewhat neglected. At this stage, the students’ output mostly mirrors Tamara’s, with te reo Māori words and formulaic phrases being integrated within predominantly English sentences.

When planning the inquiry, Tamara was very open about the occasional need to seek cultural expertise beyond the school. Tamara was very proactive in “tapping into the resources” needed to support her. This might mean requesting favours from the Māori community, or negotiating with her school for funding to pay for help. In Tamara’s view, bringing in an expert to teach traditional Māori games is comparable to “having a specialist netball coach come in,” in that reimbursement may be required. Accordingly, it is necessary to be willing to have those potentially difficult conversations about funding, if required. Nevertheless, the opportunity to connect with others in the community was “incredibly powerful, in terms of my practice, recognising my limits and working with others to teach my students and myself.”

Final lessons learned

Despite the challenges of not being an expert in Māori language and culture, Tamara teaches these with passion and enthusiasm. This example of practice illustrates an advantage Tamara has that many specialist language teachers do not have – that is, she is with the same class, all day, every school day. This means she is able to make the most of genuine opportunities to make intercultural comparisons and connections, both planned and ‘in the moment’, across all the learning areas. A key for Tamara has been recognising and being open about her own limitations, and embracing support as a valuable opportunity to continue developing both her own and her students’ knowledge of te ao Māori. Thinking about the year ahead, Tamara concluded:

I look forward to revisiting some of my previous lessons ... I plan on using my Te Ao Māori approach in order to embed Māori across the curriculum as well as developing Māori in a written form. How this will look, I am not sure just yet!

Discussion starters: a focus on integration

Despite not being fluent in te reo Māori, Tamara frequently embedded ‘snippets’ of Māori language and culture within her teaching – regardless of what the ‘subject’ was at the time. To what extent do you think this could work in your own context? Tamara expressed some misgivings about not teaching the written form of the target language. Would this be a concern for you? How important do you think reading and writing in the target language is (compared to listening and speaking) when students are just starting out?

In what ways might teaching te reo Māori be different to teaching other languages (such as Chinese or Spanish) in a New Zealand school? What are the potential opportunities and obstacles in each case?

Key Resource

Newton, J., Yates, E., Shearn, S., & Nowitzki, W. (2010). *Intercultural Communicative Language Teaching: Implications for effective teaching and learning - a literature review and an evidence-based framework for effective teaching*. Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Education.

Jocelyn Howard and Adèle Scott were the authors of this Engaging Example of Practice.

Using Students’ Inquiries for Intercultural Exploration



Focus principles: exploration and reflection; comparisons and connections

Focus key competencies: participating and contributing; relating to others; using language, symbols, and texts

Context

Kathryn teaches Japanese at an intermediate school in the North Island that has historically offered a range of languages to its students. A significant support for the inclusion of languages is the school’s recent accreditation to offer the International Baccalaureate (IB) which includes in its vision “creating internationally minded people” (International Baccalaureate, 2013). All teachers in the school teach basic Te Reo Māori and teachers with some proficiency in an international language teach that language to students in a team, usually consisting of approximately 120 students. The timetable has ‘teaming slots’ once or twice a week where groups of 32 students rotate through 30-minute slots of languages, physical education and ICT.

All language teachers in the school have received specialised professional learning and development in teaching languages. This PLD has influenced Kathryn’s choice to adopt the IRDPX method (Gilbert, 2009) to teach vocabulary. She also has some familiarity with the ten Ellis principles (Ellis, 2005).

At the beginning of the project, Kathryn acknowledged that she did not feel comfortable

teaching Japanese, a language she learned at high school and university. She currently describes her proficiency as low-intermediate since she has “not used the language for over 25 years.” She revealed her initial belief that the aim of language teaching was to “reach perfection in the way the students spoke the language,” with an expectation of “reaching a native-like proficiency.” To achieve this, she emphasised repetition of vocabulary and structures which she presented via songs, video clips and games. Even though her stated goal was for “students to leave my class knowing that ‘hey, I’m good at languages,’” Kathryn believed that the structure of language delivery at her school hindered the students’ retention of language.

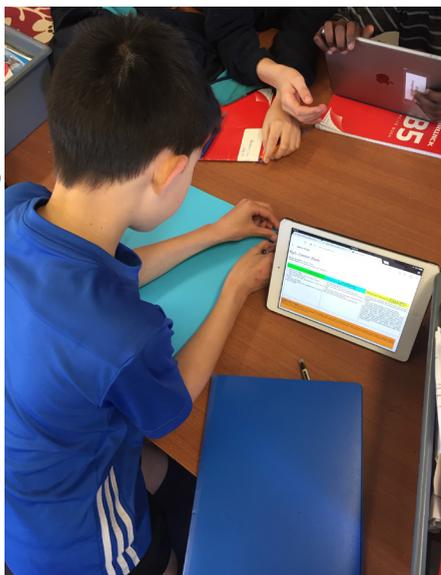
Against this background, for Kathryn the six Newton, et al. (2010) principles were “a revelation.” They opened her eyes to what she saw as more realistic aims to language teaching by focusing on the development of interculturality. This released her from the expectation that her students needed to be perfect for there to be communication, and led to a shift in purpose, which was “to provide students with a ‘taster’ of language learning and a snapshot of the way other countries function.”

Planning the inquiry

Kathryn chose to focus her inquiry on Newton, et al.’s Principles 3 and 4. She thought that Principle 3 went well with the school’s focus on reflecting through students’ inquiries. She also wanted to work on her students’ understanding of both similarities and differences across cultures (Principle 4). She wanted “to lead my students into viewing the culture through a neutral lens,” and going beyond facts about culture to “more the thinking behind them.”

Kathryn set up a student inquiry into food in Japan that would take a whole school term. She identified internet resources (websites and YouTube videos) that the students could use to explore different aspects of the relationship of the Japanese people to food. Her students - who are highly digitally literate - worked in groups to research potential topics, then created KWL charts (What I know, what I wonder, and what I learned) in shared Google documents where they organised the information they had found. The information was then shared with the class on a poster. Students were then directed to provide feedback to each other about their poster. Finally, each group wrote a reflective statement about the process.

As an organised and methodical person, Kathryn felt that planning for this inquiry suited her well.



Working on KWL chart

For the first time as a teacher of languages, she felt in control and prepared for the term through a process of “figuring out the end point and working back to how to get there and then breaking it down really specifically.” This gave her “the confidence to know exactly what I was doing and teach towards it.” Another important realisation motivated by the inquiry was that the KWL charts would provide tangible evidence of the students’ cultural learning, something she had not considered before. Kathryn was aware that the exclusive focus in this inquiry into Japanese food culture might side-line learning the language, but she felt that “my language classes aren’t just about language.”

Inquiry in action

To start the unit on ‘food’, Kathryn’s classes learned the vocabulary of food names in Japanese, the expressions for ‘like’, ‘dislike’ or ‘love’, and some of the cultural protocols around food. Throughout these lessons, the students watched video clips of Japanese food in different contexts. Kathryn wanted her students to go “beyond observing eating sushi with chopsticks” to other contexts such as the food eaten in school, the changes in Japanese diet over time, the aesthetic presentation of food, table manners, etc. These preliminary lessons drew on the IRDPX principle of introducing language where Kathryn built from isolated words to sentences. Language was always first introduced orally and practised with songs and games before the students saw it in written form and eventually wrote it down in their books. During the lesson there was a presentation of the language either by Kathryn or a video clip, then students would repeat chorally. They would then do some oral pair work and complete some worksheets. After these language-focused lessons, Kathryn introduced the inquiry plan to the students and set up the groups’ shared documents that they would use for the rest of the term. Since the students are used to the inquiry cycle, the expectations of the Japanese food task seemed well-known to them. The students’ strong ICT skills enabled them to navigate and research online confidently. They were also comfortable working in groups and - for the most part - managed their work independently from teacher close-monitoring.

Kathryn’s role during the group work sessions was to keep the students on track. She allowed time for groups to explore different topics yet announced a deadline for when they should have decided on a topic. She hoped that the inquiry would make the students “richer in their understanding of Japanese, not just the language.” She insisted that “we were looking at the cultural aspect of life in Japan and the context we are using is food and they are looking at



Working on shared document

different thoughts and attitudes and behaviours around that.” It was important to her that students did not just identify isolated facts about their chosen topics, but that they investigated the reasoning behind particular ways for doing things.

Each step of the inquiry took longer than Kathryn initially planned, and she decided to extend the time initially allocated to the unit because she was pleased with the level of engagement she was observing in her students. She deemed the inquiry learning to be a success because “they’re thoroughly enjoying what they are finding out and they are enjoying sharing it with other people too and discussing it.” Kathryn acknowledged that some of the groups’ posters, planned as the last product of the inquiries, did not fully reflect the richness of the process. However, the fact that there were tangible products for all to see was pleasing to her.

Reflecting on the inquiry

Kathryn began her reflection on the process by commenting that she considered her students’ inquiries “really worthwhile. They loved it. They feel knowledgeable, and they feel like they have a proper understanding of [Japanese culture].” The increased and sustained engagement with the inquiries was in her view a good measure of the potential of the intercultural focus. She was delighted to see how the students were able to draw similarities and differences across cultures, not only between Japan and New Zealand, but also with their own ethnicities. She felt her students “connected with Japan. They were passionate about what they had found. The inquiries gave them ownership of all they had learned.” Since there was no guarantee that students would continue with the language after intermediate school, Kathryn felt that this intercultural focus, which had “really fulfilled the kids,” would increase their motivation to take a language when they moved to high school. Kathryn also thought that an important outcome of deepening students’ knowledge of Japanese culture was for her students to feel “a connection with Japan.” Finally, Kathryn mentioned that a consequence of a stronger focus on interculturality was that “I am talking to students more about the way they think / do things in their culture, rather than lumping all my students together as ‘us’”. In other words, Kathryn was acknowledging and responding to the diverse learners in her own classroom (Newton, et al.’s Principle 5).

When reflecting about changes in her teaching, Kathryn mentioned three aspects. First, she talked about a shift in attitude about language teaching. Whereas initially she was “trying to cram as much language as I could to compensate for the lack time we have for learning,” she was now “far less stressed on the fact that they don’t retain anything with our short times frames.”

There was also a shift in Kathryn’s expectation of “perfection in language.” Her initial frustration “when students mispronounced words or put the wrong word into sentences” had turned to a feeling of enormous relief when she encountered Newton, et al.’s Principle 6 which shifted the ideal from “native-speaker competence to communicative competence.” Although she still regarded accuracy as important, she became more

comfortable “focusing on communication, not perfection.”

The third change in Kathryn’s practice was the inclusion of culture not solely “as mere snippets of things I remembered or had heard about that happened in Japan,” but as having equal attention to language in the way she planned her course. She noted, “I decided to plan the whole unit thoroughly in advance, specifically searching out different cultural areas that I could include.” As a consequence, she felt that “my lessons were more interesting and with more information about similarities and differences.” Her planning in advance allowed her to see that, since inquiry was central to IB schools, she could have her students inquiring into aspects of Japanese culture. Up to then, she “simply hadn’t thought of student inquiries as a part of my language programme.” The intercultural inquiry made it clearer for her to see a way forward in her intercultural teaching, without having to know it all herself.

Challenges in practice

Kathryn knows that the structure of language delivery in her school is a significant limitation on the goals set for what the students can learn in their two intermediate school years. Her inquiry allowed her to see ways in which successful language learning can still happen. She acknowledges, “I am still not 100% convinced that it is easy to get the balance between language learning and culture,” but she is committed to continuing to explore ways to make it work. She would also like to be able to connect the languages more strongly to the IB themes that are agreed by the school.

Another challenge that Kathryn wants to overcome is her own limited proficiency in Japanese. An outcome of the inquiry for her was that she realised how much she loves Japanese. She wants to enhance her proficiency and eventually apply for a scholarship to spend some time in Japan. Her school has a long-standing relationship with a school in Japan. Groups of students from both schools spend a few weeks every year being in each country and Kathryn would want to use these opportunities to boost students’ motivation and further her school’s knowledge and interest in Japan and the Japanese language.

Kathryn is aware that learning about other cultures is time consuming and still wonders how busy primary teachers can find the time to locate appropriate cultural resources for their language teaching.

Final lessons learned

Kathryn started this project as a teacher who had arrived to language teaching without a strong background in the language or in language pedagogy. Before this inquiry, she felt stressed about her Japanese lessons, not only because of contextual restrictions to the time she had available with the groups of students she was teaching, but also because of her own beliefs about the aims of language teaching. These beliefs were compounded by her insecurity about her own knowledge of and proficiency in the language.

As she came to know the Newton, et al. principles and revisited the goals set by the New Zealand Curriculum for languages about the development of intercultural communicative competence, Kathryn started to see her teaching in a different light. The opportunity to inquire into her teaching allowed her to see how she could incorporate the Newton, et al. principles into her own practice and she has been pleased with the results so far. She is willing to try to find a balance between language aims and culture aims.

Towards the end of the inquiry, Kathryn realised that language teaching can be more strongly connected to other aspects of her school, including the IB themes and the emphasis on reflective learning through student inquiries. Mid-way through her inquiry Kathryn was appointed as head of languages and her first action was to share her work in the 'food' unit with her colleagues. She now has a firm plan to motivate all students across the school to understand both their own and other cultures while learning a language. She plans to create a two-year plan where language and culture are interwoven into each school term in ways that would allow for some depth in both aspects. Kathryn is hopeful that increasing students' motivation for languages at intermediate school will mean more of them will study languages when they go on to secondary school.

Discussion starters

Kathryn realised that some of her beliefs about the aims of language teaching were creating unnecessary frustration. This seems to be a common occurrence in primary and intermediate schools where the teaching of languages is not included in teacher education programmes. How can teachers of languages in primary schools be better equipped to teach languages?

One of Kathryn's contextual limitations was the structure of language teaching at her school where groups of students rotate through several discrete subjects for 30 minutes once or twice a week. If time limitation is the case in your school, how have you overcome that? Have you found alternative ways to better structure language teaching in busy primary classrooms?

Kathryn was concerned that busy primary teachers with limited knowledge of the language and culture they are teaching do not have time to better resource their language lessons. What resources do you use in your language teaching? How have you found out about useful resources?

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International Baccalaureate. (2013). What is an IB education? Retrieved from: <http://www.ibo.org/globalassets/digital-toolkit/brochures/what-is-an-ib-education-en.pdf>

Key Resource

Newton, J., Yates, E., Shearn, S., & Nowitzki, W. (2010). Intercultural Communicative Language Teaching: Implications for effective teaching and learning - a literature review and an evidence-based framework for effective teaching. Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Education.

Constanza Tolosa was the author of this Engaging Example of Practice.

In the context of a two-year project (2016-2017) funded by the Ministry of Education through the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI), a team of five researchers worked in partnership with five primary/intermediate school teachers. Our goal was to investigate how programmes designed to fulfil the requirements of *Learning Languages* could enhance Year 7 and 8 school students' intercultural capability. This booklet presents a series of five in-depth 'engaging examples of practice' that outline the journeys of these five teachers, with particular focus on the outcomes of their research- and theory-informed inquiries into their own practices.

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