

AVOIDING STEREOTYPING AND ENHANCING INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

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Abstract: Anecdotally, language learners often struggle to acquire intercultural understanding. Teaching intercultural understanding presents significant challenges for language teachers. This article offers some insights into language learners' intercultural understanding and strategies to help enhance intercultural understanding that seek to promote analytical and critical thinking. The aim is to build on the principles of the emerging pedagogy of *Intercultural Language Learning* (IcLL). IcLL suggests there is a 'third place', where cultures overlap. IcLL acknowledges the importance of identifying with the 'other', whilst not denying the 'self'. Intercultural competence requires sensitivity to difference, an ability to identify with others and to critically reflect on one's own cultural background.

Key words: intercultural understanding, stereotyping, culture, third place

Language educators at all levels face significant challenges in teaching intercultural understanding. The task of teaching a language seems clear enough; there is vocabulary, sentence structures and grammar to be taught. There is also 'content knowledge' or 'culture' in terms of learning about the countries where the target language is spoken. That is how some teachers, students and communities view language teaching and learning. However, that is an oversimplification. This article explores intercultural understanding in greater depth, firstly by pointing out some of the risks before focusing on how intercultural understanding might be better developed.

CONCERNS ON LANGUAGE LEARNING IN A MULTI-CULTURE CONTEXT

Generalizing

We all generalize in order to make sense of the world around us. We look for patterns in what we observe to help us understand the world that we see. Through formal education we are taught to look for patterns, to help understand unfamiliar phenomena using our existing knowledge. This may occur in language learning, geography, mathematics and almost any subject area.

Teaching grammar heavily relies on 'rules' or patterns. Teachers sometimes see the surprised look of students when they encounter exceptions to the rules. Teaching plural forms in English is a good example. Commonly, pluralization in English is achieved by merely adding the letter 's'. For example, the singular form 'house' is pluralized as 'houses'. However this rule for pluralizing cannot be applied uniformly. For instance, the singular form of 'mouse' cannot be pluralized as 'mouses'; it is 'mice'. This is a good example where generalizing can lead to errors. This can be referred to as over-generalizing.

Apart from grammar, generalising also occurs in other ways, including how we perceive other cultures. For example, when meeting people from another country, we may be naturally curious and interested to observe their characteristics. As we observe those characteristics, it is likely that we will focus on the differences. As we mentally process observations, we tend to start forming opinions and conclusions. In doing so, it is common to categorize the new information into similar types of groups that we already recognize. For instance, if meeting an Australian person for the first time, it is easy to categorize him/her as a Westerner. This is of course a very broad category and implies that Westerners are a distinct group with much in common. Moreover, a hidden assumption in this type of categorization may be that Westerners are a homogenous group. However, like the earlier example of the grammatical error of pluralizing, it is also possible to over-generalize about people.

Stereotyping

Over-generalizing can affect peoples' attitudes towards others and impact on their intercultural understanding. Over-generalising can lead to stereotyping. Consider the following statements, noting the underlined word in each:

- Europeans all speak English.
- All Westerners are wealthy.
- In America everybody drives big cars.
- In Australia there are kangaroos everywhere.
- It's always raining and cold in England.

When we carefully consider each of the above statements, rationale thinking and perhaps general knowledge, suggests that each statement is not literally true. Yet we may hear statements like these produced by native and non native speakers alike. Rationale thinking or critical thinking helps us understand that these statements are not literally accurate, but are a way of emphasising a point. Such statements can lead to stereotyping and at the same time may reflect stereotyping.

Statements such as those above could be accepted by people who lack skills in critical thinking or by people with a limited general knowledge. For example, high school students may not have the general knowledge or the critical thinking skills to analyse and deconstruct these types of statements. As a result, they may accept the statements as facts. Quite unintentionally, teachers and textbook writers may sometimes present sentences like this, perhaps to demonstrate vocabulary, grammar or sentence structure. Unintentionally, students may be implicitly taught to over-generalise and stereotype.

To avoid stereotyping, great care is needed with the choice of words presented to students. Generalizing is still acceptable, if not necessary. However, when generalizing, it is important to continuously monitor one's vocabulary selection, in order to reduce the risks of over-generalizing and stereotyping.

The left column of the table below contains the over-generalizations mentioned earlier. The right column contains alternative expressions that convey the same basic information, but in a way that reduces the likelihood of over-generalising and stereotyping. As such, sentences in the right column are described as demonstrating realistic generalizations.

Table 1. Example of Avoiding Over-generalizations

OVER-GENERALIZATIONS	REALISITIC GENERALIZATIONS
Europeans <u>all</u> speak English.	<u>Many</u> Europeans speak English.
<u>All</u> westerners are wealthy.	<u>Some</u> westerners are wealthy.
In America <u>everybody</u> drives big cars.	In America <u>some people</u> drive big cars.

Table continued

In Australia there are kangaroos <u>every-</u> <u>where</u> .	In Australia there are <u>a lot of</u> kangaroos.
It's <u>always</u> raining and cold in England.	It's <u>often</u> raining and cold in England.

Language teachers at any level should be mindful of the importance of presenting realistic representations to students. Language teachers in particular have an opportunity to teach the importance of vocabulary selection, and the significance of implicit and explicit meanings. This is a good practice of language teaching that should be standard practice.

Perhaps more than other subject areas, language teachers have an opportunity to teach students about the dangers of stereotyping. This may even include presenting students with over-generalisations in their first language to draw attention to the issue and to demonstrate how it is done in their own culture. This helps develop critical thinking and analytical skills about one's self and of one's own cultural background.

It is common practice that language teachers compare the 'culture' of the language being studied with the students' background culture. This should be done sensitively and carefully as it may lead to over-generalizing and stereotyping. As part of comparing cultures, it can be extremely useful to first examine the students' own background 'culture'. It is important that students understand that their own culture is complex, that it cannot always be easily defined and that it is not practiced by everyone in their 'community' in the same way. This may help students understand that another culture should not be over simplified. Learners of English should understand that the 'culture' of people from the English speaking world is not uniform, not simple, nor is it easily defined. To suggest there is a single 'culture' of English speakers is a gross over-generalisation and a misrepresentation, yet this is the message that may be interpreted by students by use of a term such as 'Westerners'.

CULTURE AND 'OTHERING'

In the field of second language acquisition, language is recognised as being embedded with cultural understandings (Kramersch, 1993; Kramersch, 1998; Byram 1994). Culture is embedded in language in the form of assumed or implied meanings that are communicated through shared understandings and contextual dependency. Intercultural understanding therefore relates to the ability to understand 'hidden meanings', assumptions and contextual meanings that are implicit in language.

Defining 'culture' is problematic (Read, 2002; Lo Bianco et al., 2003). Interpretations of what constitutes 'culture' vary. Postmodernist thinking views culture as being unstable, debatable and complex. It views 'cultures' as something that individuals interact with, partly adopting and partly rejecting (Yon, 2000). In this way, culture is viewed as dynamic and always changing. People may create culture as much as culture creates people.

However, the more traditional notion of 'culture' that remains is what 'others' have, what makes them and keeps them different and separate from us (Duranti, 1997). This means that culture defines social boundaries and affects the formation of identity in a divisive manner. This concept of culture enables us to define a sense of self and belonging to a group. It also positions other cultures as being different and therefore what we are not. Recognising the cultural differences of others in no way guarantees that one identifies with or accepts those 'cultures'. In fact, Duranti (1997) suggests that colonialists used the term 'culture' as a tool of domination and that even today it remains a way of explaining why minority and marginalised groups do not assimilate into mainstream society.

In the context where more than one culture encounters and interacts, multiculturalism, othering is also considered inescapable (Ang, 2001; Bhabha, 1994) for reinforcing 'othering'. Despite perhaps being well-intentioned, multiculturalism tends to celebrate the exotic nature of 'the other', thereby emphasising differences. This approach to culture tends to reinforce the notion of opposing fixed cultures. At the same time, similarities across cultures tend to be implicitly overlooked or ignored.

Achieving intercultural understanding in the language classroom is a difficult challenge for both educators and students. It needs to be recognised that 'culture' is a complex concept and that stereotyping often oversimplifies 'culture' in an unrealistic manner. In this complexity, it is also important to look for positive ways that are not overly-complex, which can be used in the classroom.

The following list represents tips for language teachers to avoid 'othering', which includes avoiding over-generalizing and stereotyping:

- Be very careful when generalising;
- Avoid over-generalising;
- Avoid words like "always", "all", "everybody", "everywhere";
- Use words like "some", "sometimes", "many";
- Discuss how 'othering' can be negative;
- Teach how to identify stereotyping – eg in one's own culture (eg in the mass media);

- Don't only focus on (cultural) differences; also focus on similarities;
- Give students 'balanced' images of the Target Culture – eg. images of rich & poor.

EXPLORING THE 'THIRD PLACE'

Language is described as being variable, interactional and inherently containing culture (Crozet et al., 1999). Every time language is used a cultural act is performed (Kramsch, 1993). As such, representations of culture and meaning are constantly being produced and reformed. The notion of the "third place" is where meaning is redefined, negotiated and reshaped to attain mutual understanding that in some way transcends more obvious cultural boundaries.

Conceptualising the 'third place' is consistent with post-structuralist thinking, where "...language, far from reflecting an already given social reality, constitutes social reality for us" (Weedon, 1997: 22). Weedon (1997) elaborates that language does not merely give meaning to events retrospectively, but is also expressive and reflective in a manner that is continually being created. A poststructuralist view of language is: "...not the reflection of an already fixed reality but a version of meaning" (Weedon, 1997: 75).

The emerging pedagogy of Intercultural Language Learning (IcLL) is where language teaching pedagogy reflects a post structuralist influence. The identity of language learners is recognised as multiple and variable. Language and behaviour are recognised as being affected by with whom a speaker is engaged (Crozet et al., 1999; Lo Bianco et al., 2003). In effect, IcLL is a move towards Norton Pierce's desire (1995) for Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory to develop a concept of language learners as having complex social identities where language is both a reflection of identity and a medium for reshaping it.

The concept of a "third place" in IcLL refers to cross cultural communication in a language, typically represented between native and non-native speakers. It involves an awareness of the cultural boundaries and an ability to manage an intercultural space where all parties are comfortable participants (Crozet et al., 1999). This notion of harmony may be somewhat idealistic, and may be intended as a favourable condition for the case of second language learners. In terms of post structuralism, the notion of identity is a site of contestation, contradiction and instability (Weedon, 1987; Norton Pierce, 1995), and as such the 'third place' may not always be a 'comfortable' place.

The 'third place' is recognised as not merely a combination of two cultures. It is much more than that. It is where elements of the two cultures meet and interact in unpredictable ways that lead to new and dynamic cultural aspects (Bolatagici, 2004). Hence the 'third place' may demonstrate new cultural aspects that contradict the cultural norms and understandings of one of or even both cultures. In this way the 'third place' develops its own unique 'culture'.

The area of hybridity suggests a 'third space' as a transformative site of possibilities of new subject positions, multiplicity, where identity is continuously being reconfigured. Work in the field of diaspora and hybridity has helped promote an appreciation of the sense of duality, cultural pluralism and multiple belongings (Gilbert, Khoo and Lo, 2000).

"Cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in relation to Self to Other" (Bhabha 1994: 35-36). Bhabha (1994) refers to a 'third space' where symbols of culture have no unity or fixity. He suggests that the structure of symbolic representation in the process of language results in meanings that are not transparent and are dependent on 'cultural positionality', that is the context of the particular time and specific place. This view challenges traditional notions of culture and cultural identity.

Some people feel threatened by the notion of learning a 'foreign' language and view it as a threat to their own cultural identity. Ang (2001) notes a conservative resistance to globalisation. As a result, identity is portrayed as something that must be protected and something that provides protection from the dangers of global forces. However, if we view identity as being multiple, flexible and dynamic then we can understand that it is entirely possible to operate across cultural boundaries.

BUILDING INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

It is sometimes assumed that learning another language automatically results in intercultural understanding. However, it should not be assumed that the activity of language learning in itself automatically ensures intercultural understanding (Ingram et al., 2008). Crozet and Liddicoat (2000) argue that the 'communicative approach' to language teaching has failed to explicitly focus on the socio cultural underpinnings of language.

Pauwels (2000) notes that many language learners have only limited access to immersion or real life situations where they can use the target language. As a result, she suggests it is difficult for learners to acquire intercultural understanding naturally. Therefore, she proposes that cultural knowledge implicitly contained within language needs to be made explicit.

Intercultural understanding requires an ability to empathise and identify with others. Linn (1996) recognises that successful communication requires sensitivity to diversity. IcLL acknowledges the importance of identifying with the ‘other’, whilst not denying the ‘self’ (Crozet and Liddicoat 2000; Liddicoat et al., 2003; Dellit, 2006). This links intercultural understanding with identity and is consistent with the ‘third place’, where intercultural understanding and identity are integral dimensions of language learning.

The teaching of intercultural understanding is based on the cultural relativity of the target culture and one’s background culture. It then becomes possible to critically analyse one’s own background culture. It is also important to identify common, shared experiences, not just differences. By overly focusing on differences, negative stereotypes can be reinforced. A focus on similarities may help students to identify with the ‘otherness’ and therefore promote understanding and empathy.

Kohler et al. (2006) suggests that effective language teachers develop students to have positive attitudes towards the target language, towards cultural differences and similarities, and to language and culture in general. They also promote a positive self image in their students as users of the language.

In regard to IcLL, Scarino (2008) suggests that a shift in focus is needed, away from ‘content’ of language programs towards ‘learner needs and interests’. The suggestion is that there needs to be a focus on learners as creators of meaning through interaction. This thinking is consistent with engaging the ‘target culture’ so that students can find similarities and aspects of personal interest. This helps in self discovery and linking an understanding of self with the ‘target culture’ in a way that encourages learners to discover a ‘third place’. In this way, the target culture and language need no longer be viewed as ‘foreign’.

Native speakers do not have sole ownership of a language or its culture. If language learners feel empowered to ‘own’ the language they are learning and create their own ‘third place’ they are far more likely to be more motivated to learn the language. They are also more likely to use the language in creative, new ways and to develop language proficiency.

The following tips may be useful for developing intercultural understanding:

- Explore definitions of culture;
- Discuss how language reflects ‘micro-cultures’ eg. in a work place, a family or group of friends;

- Discuss culture explicitly as reflected in the target language;
- Promote tolerance of ambiguity & of difference;
- Explore cross-cultural similarities (as well as differences); and
- Understand that 'culture' can be used negatively to divide people and avoid doing so.

CONCLUSION

Language teachers should be aware of the potential of language to contain implicit or 'hidden' messages. Teachers' choices of words can affect how students learn to view 'other cultures'. Language teachers have a unique opportunity to help shape how their students' view the world by equipping students with the skills to interpret the language and cultural images that they experience in and outside the classroom.

Whilst language skills are the primary goal of language teaching, there is much more to be gained. Potential benefits from language learning include increased interest, understanding and tolerance towards difference. Language teaching and learning should help develop analytical skills and critical thinking. Ideally, language learners should develop tolerance towards others and a better understanding of themselves.

Language teachers have an opportunity to positively influence the way that the future generation views the world and their position in it. To optimise these positive influences, teachers need to carefully monitor and filter the language and attitudes that they demonstrate to students. Critical self reflection and analytical skills should be part of learning another language and its culture.

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