

Student performance of intercultural language learning

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Abstract

While languages education is being impacted by intercultural language learning theory, the question remains how students achieve intercultural learning. This paper reports on a study of secondary school language students in Sydney, Australia. The study took a descriptive interpretive approach to examining evidence of students' intercultural language learning. This evidence appears in a series of vignettes of classroom teacher-student interactions. The analysis of the data shows evidence of students in the process of 'becoming intercultural', as a new kind of student learning is taking place in language classrooms. This study demonstrates that visible intercultural language learning involves students in problem-solving, actively engaging their prior knowledge, analysing how language works, and developing awareness of their own identity as intercultural communicators. It is suggested that the data collection methodology employed by the researchers may model an approach which can also be used in teacher pedagogy to collect evidence of intercultural language learning in classrooms.

1 Introduction

Scholars have proposed that a shift in focus to learning that is 'intercultural' in its orientation brings about effective and engaged student classroom learning across the curriculum (Corbett, 2003; DeJaeghere & Zhang, 2008). Intercultural education programs develop students' abilities to think, act, discriminate and experience cultural difference in appropriate ways (DeJaeghere & Zhang, 2008, p. 255). When applied to languages education, intercultural language learning in classrooms asks students to pause, reflect, question, move back and forth between understandings they have in, and of, their various languages. No longer is linguistic proficiency the sole aim of teaching and learning in language classrooms, rather there are "new names and targets" (Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan, & Street, 2001, p. 3): that is, students learn the foreign language and gain a set of intercultural understandings which allow them to explore why language is as it is, and how processes of language and culture impact on meaning making.

However we believe that alongside this new intercultural orientation are questions that remain about classroom practice and student learning. What is the visible evidence that a student has become 'intercultural'? How does a teacher recognize students' intercultural language learning? This paper presents findings that address these research questions through data from a study of one secondary school context in Australia.

The study reported here was undertaken in a comprehensive co-educational school in inner-city Sydney, Australia. The school offers preschool, primary and secondary education. Groups of secondary students, aged 12–14 years, in the first and second years of secondary school (Years 7 and 8) were learning either one or more languages, from a suite of offerings including French, German, Italian, Spanish and Japanese. In research on this same student cohort two years previously (Moloney, 2008) reported that many cultural backgrounds and languages were represented among their families.

The two researchers used a descriptive interpretive approach to explore intercultural language learning in students by analysing observations of classrooms and transcripts of lessons. As an outcome of the research, the researchers ask whether this methodology itself could be one of several new strategies for teachers themselves to employ that might allow them to gauge the visibility of their students' intercultural language learning.

2 Background context

The current language education syllabus (Board of Studies NSW, 2003) in the Australian context represents a theoretical and conceptual shift in language teaching compared to its predecessors. It is aligned with theoretical sociolinguistic models of the intercultural language learning movement (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, & Kohler, 2003), a scholarly direction which has conceptualized new goals for language learning in educational contexts.

In the past, guided by previous syllabus frames, teachers may have focused on just one goal for language learning: that is, language acquisition with its focus on correct form, grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition and so on. The language teacher's aim was to assess students' language use (primarily reported through statements on listening, speaking, reading and writing).

The current syllabus from 2003 conceptualizes language development as occurring in three areas of learning outcomes: not solely the aforementioned language use (which the new syllabus calls 'Using Language (UL)'). The syllabus (see Fig. 1) also focuses on the type of learning called 'Making Linguistic Connections (MLC)', and learning called 'Moving Between Cultures (MBC)'.

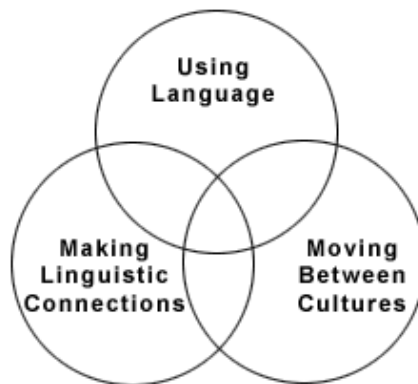


Fig. 1: Board of Studies Kindergarten to Grade 10 languages syllabus objectives (Board of Studies NSW, 2003).

In the state of New South Wales in Australia, language teachers design teaching programs which teach and assess student learning outcomes in each of three areas: 'Using language' (UL), 'Making linguistic connections' (MLC) and 'Moving between cultures' (MBC). By 'making linguistic connections', the Stage 4 (relevant to the group of language learners in our study) syllabus refers to indicator statements that the language learner "demonstrates understanding of the impor-

tance of appropriate use of language in diverse contexts” and “explores the diverse ways in which meaning is conveyed by comparing and describing structures and features of” the target language (Board of Studies NSW, 2003, p.16). By ‘moving between cultures’, the syllabus refers to indicator statements that the language learner “demonstrates understanding of the interdependence of language and culture” and “demonstrates knowledge of key features of the culture of the communities” where the target language is spoken (Board of Studies NSW, 2003, p. 16). The objectives for language programs are to be assessed at stages between Kindergarten to Year 10.

This is a prescriptive syllabus, to the extent that, students will be able to, for example, “4.UL.1, demonstrate understanding of the main ideas and supporting detail in spoken texts and respond appropriately” (Board of Studies NSW, 2003, p. 16) but not so prescriptive that specific texts and grammar are prescribed.

Although the new syllabi appeared in 2003, teachers have only gradually come to terms with what it means to be observing and assessing MLC and MBC, considered to be (in anecdotal evidence we have from our roles in working with language teacher professional development workshops over the past 10 years) the two less straightforward or less visible areas of intercultural language learning. What has often challenged teachers’ engagement with the new intercultural imperatives has been their reluctance to judge a learner’s intercultural learning. Involved therefore is both how teachers set up the task to elicit the intercultural language learning, and their recognition of it. We continue in this paper to refer to the visibility aspect as students ‘performing’ their intercultural language learning, a performance which can be observed.

There has been little formal evaluation of whether and how students are performing (making visible) intercultural language learning goals. Research in other states of Australia as well as in the UK shows very little progress in our understanding of whether and how our language learners become intercultural (Byram, 1997; Lo Bianco, Liddicoat, & Crozet, 1999; Scarino, 2007b).

3 Limitations

Permission was granted to undertake this research in one school – a school which allowed convenience sampling for the researchers and where the first author was a staff member at the time. We are unable, therefore, to make claims about the generalisable nature of our data and whether it applies to all language learners in all schools everywhere. Researching in other schools, in classes other than German, Italian, French, Spanish and Japanese, with other groups of students and teachers may allow a fuller set of data to inform the research questions. Interviews with teachers after the observation of lessons may also elicit more informative data.

4 Theories of intercultural language learning

The theoretical framing of the study is within two key areas in the literature. The intercultural notions refer to the theories of language acquisition which have grown around sociocultural theory. The notions regarding students performing their intercultural language learning are situated within theoretical understandings about the process of learning.

Australian scholars (Liddicoat et al., 2003) have published their ideas alongside scholars from the USA (Kramsch, 1993) and the UK (Corbett, 2003) within the field of languages education to posit that sociocultural theory underpins this intercultural orientation towards language learning. A new interculturally-oriented pedagogy, it is claimed, will “make a qualitative difference to students’ engagement in learning languages” (Liddicoat et al., 2003) and bring about greater acquisition of intercultural skills through particular tasks and attitudes.

Essentially intercultural language learning is viewed by scholars in the Australian context as a ‘stance’ or ‘orientation’ (Scarino, 2007a) adopted by the teacher and learners towards the language learned, towards the language processes learned, and towards their new understandings of ‘other and self’ as a result of a deep and reflective examination of their learning. Indeed it is proposed

that students' acquisition of intercultural understandings may be the critical factor in their resultant deeper learning and world view (Liddicoat et al., 2003, p. 46).

Essentially within the intercultural notions lies a belief that language itself is a cultural act (Kramsch, 1993). The literature of intercultural language learning acknowledges its debt to anthropologist Geertz (1973):

This paradigm for teaching culture sees culture as sets of practices, that is, as the lived experience of individuals (Geertz, 1973, 1983). Such a view of culture of necessity sees action as context-sensitive, negotiated and highly variable ... cultural competence is seen as the ability to interact in the target culture in informed ways ... a solid approach to culture should integrate a range of different understandings of culture as a core component of language education (Liddicoat, 2003, p. 6)

Byram (1989) and Kramsch (1993) describe a process of the individual developing interculturally through de-centering from their own first culture. Individuals negotiate meaning across cultural boundaries and establish their own identity as a user of another language. Kramsch (1993) suggested the notion of the learner developing an independent 'third place' from which one can make reflective observations of both one's own culture and the target culture.

The Report on Intercultural Language Learning (Liddicoat et al., 2003) traces and synthesises developments in language, culture, and intercultural learning. Liddicoat (2002) had argued for a non-linear, cyclical process of intercultural language learning which draws attention to the student's internal processes of 'noticing' features of the language. Intercultural language learning is facilitated by classroom questioning by both teachers and students (Crichton, 2007; Morgan, 2007; Scarino, 2007b). Scarino, Liddicoat and Crichton (2009) posit that evidence of intercultural language learning may include students performing demonstrations of their language learning interactions that reflect these five dimensions:

- performing, communicating in the target language
- understanding how language works
- analyzing how language choices contribute to make meaning
- understanding processes involved in communicating
- developing self awareness as language users.

In order to examine how a teacher encourages language learners to 'perform'/'make visible' their intercultural language learning, there is a need to deconstruct the process of learning itself. Such a discussion follows in the next section.

5 Theories of the process of learning

According to Shepard (2000, p. 8) the process of learning involves learners:

- actively building on their prior knowledge and cultural perspectives;
- displaying higher order thinking and problem-solving;
- developing certain important dispositions and habits of mind;
- demonstrating learning of processes in learning itself, as well as the content of learning;
- reaching outcomes through metacognition or self-monitoring of learning and thinking; and
- actively evaluating their own work.

Scarino's work (2007b) refers to the learners in this process as 'performers' of language learning. In the process of producing the target language, students are involved in a process that involves negotiating meaning. She also notes that students are 'analysers': they receive, process and analyse the language they are learning.

Consequently when language teachers are required to view the intercultural language learning undertaken by their students, they may frame their observations by focusing on how language learning is being performed: how students demonstrate intercultural learning when they use, speak and write the target language, and respond to material they have listened to, have read, or viewed with insight into the cultural values and practices embedded in the language. It is the task of the language teacher to elicit performances of intercultural language learning and recognize such learning as evidence of intercultural learning outcomes set down in the mandatory syllabus documents (Board of Studies NSW, 2003).

6 Previous studies

There is limited research on student performance of intercultural language learning. We report having engaged with the research of Corbaz (2001) and Moloney (2008) that have examined intercultural language learning in young language learners. Another study by Morgan (2009) captures how young learners of 5-8 years of age are invited to share their own experiences and understanding of self and others through engaging with authentic target language texts in class discussions. Similarly few studies have been undertaken on the identification of intercultural language learning in secondary school learners. Regarding this dearth of research evidence on students 'performing' their intercultural language learning, Liddicoat (2002, p. 6) commented that the core problem is "that there is no clearly articulated link between cultural knowledge and language use, nor of the way the information taught will affect the learner as a user of the language."

Nevertheless, the immediate demand for teachers is to produce evidence of students' intercultural language learning. Teachers are challenged to elicit appropriate evidence, how this can be expanded (Moss, 2008) and the types of task which will elicit this evidence.

Scarino et al. (2009, p. 11) recommend an inquiry approach that allows teachers to better understand the nature of the learning that is occurring, and not just to document its products (De-landshere, 2002). In its analysis and interpretation of collected data, this project has explored a variety of forms of evidence of visible 'performed' student intercultural language learning. Its findings demonstrate that intercultural language learning can be made visible.

7 Methodology, data collection and analysis

We agree with Baker (2006, p. 39) and his comments on suitable research methodology and the assessment of intercultural learning:

Language tests and measurements are unlikely to fully represent an idea or theoretical concept. Complex and rich descriptions are the indispensable partner of measurement and testing

As the researchers in this project, we gathered data on students performing their intercultural language learning and analyzing what they had learned. These were the 'visible', 'performed' aspects of the students' intercultural language learning.

We also take heed of Moran's ideas. Moran (2001, p. 124) suggests that

learners need to recognize what they are going through and to purposefully take action. As teachers, we can help learners bring their experiences to the surface, to expression and articulation, so that they can decide how to respond to the culture. When learners do name their experiences – what they perceive, think, or feel – we need to be ready to help them situate this within a larger framework ... When learners can place their experiences against these models, they gain additional perspective and clarity.

The techniques that we have employed to allow us to explore intercultural language learning are therefore not only part of our methodology for our research, but become, as discussed in our

findings, the methods we suggest that teachers employ as being suitable to make visible students' intercultural language learning development.

In order to examine the visible aspects of intercultural language learning, this study used a multiple strategy qualitative research design. We collected a variety of student data in one Australian school site, to examine evidence of students' perceptions and performance of their intercultural language learning in Year 7 and 8 (students aged 12–13 years) classrooms.

8 Research design

This is a descriptive interpretive study and sits within a multiple-strategy qualitative research design. As discussed above, it has been suggested that intercultural language learning is facilitated by classroom questioning by both teachers and students (Crichton, 2007; Morgan, 2007; Scarino, 2007b). The reflective learning associated with the intercultural 'stance/orientation' towards language learning may occur in either tasks or discussions that require student reflection. The reflective learning occurs in what we describe as 'intercultural reflection points'.

The vignettes presented below include both descriptions of intercultural aspects of language classrooms, depicting the various 'intercultural reflection points', and also interpretations (students', teachers', and researchers' perceptions) of this intercultural language learning.

8.1 Researchers' role

The two researchers, at the time of data collection, represented both an "insider" (practising teacher) and an "outsider" (academic) viewpoint, to strengthen the analytical perspective. The "insider" researcher had not taught any of the students in the study, but was known to them as a staff member in the school at the time. For the "insider" researcher, in both the collection and analysis of data, her knowledge of the students and their context facilitated her adaptation of the semi-structured focus group interviews, and identification of both the "explicit and tacit cultural knowledge" (Neuman, 2000, p. 348) of students.

8.2 Participants and site selection

This project examined student language learning data in the case study high school in groups of Stage 4 students (Years 7 and 8). In the observation of six classes, the total number of participants was one hundred and twenty eight students (n=128). The total number of participants in focus group discussions was thirty six (n=36). See Table 1 for details across languages. The age range of participants was 12–14 years. Data were collected from classes in five languages: German, Japanese, Italian, French and Spanish (two classes). Gender balance was approximately 50% male, 50% female, as this balance was part of the school's policy. Focus group participants included both advanced and beginner students. All students were engaged in the study of two non-English languages.

A random sampling method was used to select and invite six students from each language class, to act as participants in the focus groups. This sampling was undertaken by listing all students in each language and targeting every third or fourth student, depending on the size of the class.

Students in the classroom observations are represented by number (Student 1, Student 2) in the sections below. Student participants in the focus groups section are represented by the initials of student names. Permission was granted by the University's ethics research committee to identify these students by using the initials of their first and second names.

	Italian	Japanese	Spanish (2 classes)	German	French	Total
Classroom observation	25	18	52	10	23	128
Focus group	6	6	12	6	6	36

Table 1: Number of student participants in classroom observation and focus groups.

The case study school was International Grammar School, a secular, independent, K–12 co-educational school, in inner-city Sydney, founded in 1984. Permission was granted by the school principal to allow the researchers to identify the school in future research publications. Both the student population and the staff are culturally diverse. The school was chosen due to its commitment to the provision of languages education, and the variety of language classes which could be examined at the same stage. The school features a partial immersion language program in the primary school (Moloney, 2004). Study of at least one language other than English is compulsory from Kindergarten until Year 10 (fourth year of secondary schooling).

9 Data collection

The researchers collected data to look for the visible evidence of student intercultural learning. Methods selected to collect data were:

- classroom observation field notes by researchers, and audio recordings of six different lessons (including two Spanish classes)
- audio recording of five focus groups, each of 40 minutes duration, with six students and one researcher participating in each. These interviews involved stimulated recall of the students' recent language lessons, as well as students' responses to semi-structured questions, to provide opportunity for their expression of perceptions of language learning. Students were asked about their perceptions of what and how they learned in regard to samples of class work chosen by the students themselves.

9.1 Data coding and analysis techniques

Analysis of transcripts of focus groups, together with analysis of the audio recordings of the lessons became the main sources of data. Triangulation was established as the two researchers included two data sets. Approval of the data collection methods, and for all aspects of the research, was given by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee in August 2008. Detailed information about the procedures of the research was provided for all participating teachers, students and their parents. Signed consent forms were collected from all participants.

An iterative, inductive process was used in the analysis of data (Ryan & Bernard, 2000):

- classroom observation field notes were examined by researchers for evidence of students as 'performers' and 'analysers' of intercultural understandings;
- the audio recording of each language lesson was transcribed and these transcripts were examined by researchers and emerging themes identified by interpretive analysis;
- the transcripts were read and re-read, and were coded to label emerging themes, as displayed by the example in Table 2.

	Text and translation	Interpretation
Teacher	“Vale. Nos llamamos y citamos – we’ll ring you ... and we’ll fix a date.” So, what’s not in here? What’s missing?	Teacher asks students to compare language behavior in the Spanish context to their knowledge of typical language behavior in an equivalent Australian context
Student 1	Bye!	Student identifies “missing” language
Teacher	Adios, yep. What else is missing?	Teacher demands more observation
Student 2	Thank you.	Student identifies “missing” language

Table 2: Extract and analysis of data.

10 Findings

This section presents findings from data collected in classroom observation and focus groups which followed the language lessons. Although the researchers collected data for five languages, for reasons of space limitations in this paper, examples in just three of the languages are discussed.

Following a brief discussion of lesson types and patterns in the data, three vignettes are outlined and examined. We claim that the vignettes present evidence of intercultural learning being ‘visible’ for teachers.

Table 3 provides a sketch of the lessons observed and the link to intercultural learning employed. By intercultural learning we refer to explicit enquiry questions, discussions, tasks which actively draw comparisons between cultures and languages and engage students in active analysis of culture and language (Liddicoat et al., 2003). These are the ‘intercultural reflection points’ mentioned earlier in this paper.

Language	Descriptions of lesson	Link to intercultural language learning
Italian	Comparison of festivals in Italy and Australia	Explicit questions and tasks
Japanese	Festivals in Japan, explicit comparison of practice with Australian festivals	Explicit comparisons, enquiry
Spanish lesson	Examination of language dialogue at a Spanish dinner party	Explicit questions and discussions

Table 3: Description of lessons observed.

10.1 Visibility of intercultural language learning

The three vignettes below have been chosen to illustrate students engaged in a variety of activities, ‘performing’ and ‘analysing’ their language learning which we claim is evidence of the visibility aspect of intercultural language learning. It has been suggested above (Scarino et al., 2009) that evidence may include interactions that reflect these five dimensions:

- performing, communicating in the target language
- understanding how language works
- analyzing how language choices contribute to make meaning
- understanding processes involved in communicating
- developing self awareness as language users.

While the vignettes exemplify some aspects of the categories above, the categories are clearly not discrete, so a number of processes may be overlapping. Our framework of interpretation looks for evidence of the local syllabus conceptualization of Making Linguistic Connections and Moving Between Cultures – aspects that language teachers in New South Wales are asked to comment on in their daily judgment of student language learning – expressed in intersection with the proposed five dimensions above.

Vignette 1: Italian

Lesson Overview

As an introduction to a sequence of two Year 8 Italian lessons, the language teacher presented an overview of the most important festivals in Italy and the value attached to them by Italian people. We deem this whole extract of the lesson to be the ‘intercultural reflection point’ discussed earlier in our paper. The teacher asked questions that the researchers believe demanded critical thought and personal opinion on the part of the students, such as:

Teacher: *Secondo voi, la festa di Carnevale e` una festa religiosa, pagana o commerciale?* [in your opinion is Carnevale a commercial festival, religious festival, or a pagan festival?]

Students offered a variety of answers to this question based on the impressions and information they had been given, and a friendly argument ensued in English as to their choices.

Teacher and students then brainstormed and listed many festivals in both Italy and Australia. This elicited an examination of what exactly constitutes a festival, in the Australian context. Students’ critical opinion was extended through scaffolded language production, in comparing Italian festivals with Australian festivals. Groups of students composed phrases about what both Italian and Australian teenagers like to do at festival time. Table 4 displays some examples.

	Text and translation	Interpretation
Teacher	<i>Durante i periodi di feste che cosa piace fare ai giovani in Italia? E ai giovani australiani?</i> What do young Italian and young Australian like to do on festivals?	Teacher poses a question which demands reference to student’s own practice
Student 1	<i>Ai Giovani italiani piacciono stare insieme e scambiare i regali per natale.</i> Young Italians like being together and exchanging presents for Christmas.	Students engage with the life of their Italian counterparts
Student 2	<i>Ai giovani australiani piace fare un BBQ per la festa di Australia</i> Young Australians like having a BBQ on Australia Day	Students examine what constitutes “festival” in Australia, and their own practice
Student 3	<i>Ai giovani australiani piace assistere ad una marcia il giorno di ANZAC</i> Young Australians like to watch the march on ANZAC day	Students examine what constitutes “festival” in Australia, and their own practice
Teacher	<i>ANZAC e` una giornata emozionante.</i> ANZAC day is an emotional day.	Teacher confirms and extends the validity of their answers

Table 4: Extract A from transcript of Italian lesson

Groups of students ranked which, in their opinion, were the most important Australian festivals, and why. The teacher scaffolded the language structures necessary for students’ answers and suggested they look for the verbs they needed in the available dictionaries, enabling them to express their opinion emerging from the group interaction. Some examples of group decisions are displayed in Table 5.

	Text and translation	Interpretation
Teacher	<i>Qual'è la festa piu` importante per te? Perche`?</i> In your opinion, what is the most important festival in Australia, and why?	Teacher places focus on students own practice
Group 1	<i>Per noi il giorno di Australia è al primo posto perche` mangiamo dell'agnello.</i> Number 1 is Australia Day, because we eat lamb.	Student uses Italian to express own practice
Group 2	<i>Il capodanno è al primo posto per noi perche` ci sono dei fuochi d'artificio.</i> Number 1 is New Year's Eve because there are fireworks.	Student uses Italian to express own practice
Group 3	<i>Il Natale perche` festeggiamo la nascita` di Gesu`</i> Christmas because we celebrate the birth of Jesus	Student uses Italian to express own practice

Table 5: Extract B from transcript of Italian lesson.

This task shows the teacher requiring that students 'perform' the target language to problem-solve and make values-based decisions as they Move Between Cultures. They have investigated the meaning of festival practices in Italy, identified meaning and value in their own cultural practice, debated and expressed their own values, in sum, performed intercultural learning developed through social interaction. The debate enabled students to recognize the particular nature of Australian culture and that, even within the class, their personal choices were diverse. With the syllabus indicators to guide her, the teacher may be looking to see whether 4.MBC.2 "a student demonstrates knowledge of key features of the culture of Italian-speaking communities" (Board of Studies NSW, 2003, p. 41) is visible here, looking particularly to see whether the students have learned about "ways in which language and behavior reflect important aspects of the culture" (Board of Studies NSW, 2003, p. 41).

In the focus group which followed this lesson students explained their thinking to researchers about their recall of the lesson:

"I didn't know how many festivals there were, and how much Italian people celebrate stuff ... In Australia we just rush past these kind of celebrations where in Italy they get more into their festivals" (Student 3).

When the students were recalling the language lesson during the focus group discussion, it appears that the students themselves undertake a meta-analysis of the language lesson. Students display evidence of developing self-awareness of language and identity, and the intercultural understanding that culture may be diverse and is located in ordinary everyday life (Williams, 1958). In their focus group, Italian students also analysed the processes involved in communicating, in observing *how* the teacher speaks Italian as well as *what* she says.

Student JC: Like all the teachers here are social, like when she comes into the room she's like (student shouts) "Buongiorno"!

Student PG: Most teachers would just be like (student speaks quietly) "good morning".

Student JC: Yeah like if we don't know, every time she says like a word she does like an action so we all know what it would be. And if we go (student speaks quietly) "buongiorno", she would be like, (shouts) "more energy!!"

Students JC and PG show understanding that the Italian teacher's energetic performance of Italian has cultural meaning, which they describe as "social", and that they, as members of this language community are also expected to perform the language with "more energy".

Another Italian student offered, as part of his appreciation of how to use Italian, an analysis of the continuity of language and culture, and his perception of *how* language has shaped national behaviour and identity:

Student WM: I think the main point of the lesson is trying to help us Australians understand Italy and the language we're learning ... the language lesson is teaching us about the culture and teaching us about the way Italians have sort of become proper Italians.

claim that if teachers take the time to conduct a recall session at strategic points in the lesson sequence, just as we undertook a recall session with our Focus Groups, students can be given adequate opportunity to conduct an informative meta-analysis of the language learning, shedding light on what they now know about processes of language learning. Kramsch (1993, p. 264) maintains that "talk about talk is what the classroom does best and yet this potential source of knowledge has not been sufficiently tapped". We believe that there is educational value in the teachers making this learning (moving between cultures; making linguistic connections) visible.

Vignette 2: Japanese

Lesson Overview

The Japanese class was also studying festivals. The lesson observed was a revision overview of all the annual festivals in Japan. In addition to eliciting recall of the information about each of the Japanese festivals at an 'intercultural reflection point', the teacher asked in Japanese what Australians do that may resemble or differ from the Japanese practice (see Table 6). The teacher is of Japanese-Swiss background, and thus can take the position of curious outsider, asking for explanation of Australian practice. For example, she asked what food is eaten at Australian New Year, why the Japanese go to the mountains rather than the beach in summer, why is Australian coming-of-age at age 21 years rather than at age 20?

Once again, with the syllabus indicators to guide her, the teacher may be looking to see whether 4.MBC.2 "a student demonstrates knowledge of key features of the culture of Japanese-speaking communities" (Board of Studies NSW, 2003, p. 41) is visible here, looking particularly to see whether the students have learned about "ways in which language and behavior reflect important aspects of the culture" (Board of Studies NSW, 2003, p. 41).

In the subsequent focus groups, students reported that it was a struggle to answer the teachers' questions about their own culture, as they had never had to analyse their own country's rituals before. We believe that these students, in the course of performing in both Japanese and English, are developing self-awareness as language users. Students reported that they enjoy this cognitive effort, and that the demand for their response personalizes their involvement with Japan and Japanese, makes it seem closer to their experience.

	Text and translation	Interpretation
Teacher	<i>Oshoogatsu ni, nani o tabemasu ka?</i> What do you eat at New Year?	Teacher asks for mediation of Australian practice.
Student 1	(pause) <i>Soseeji, suika ...</i> Sausages, water melon ...	Students identify own practice.
Student 2	My family has a special cake and you have to find the coin!	Student contributes further examples.
Teacher	<i>Nihon de, ichigatsu tsuitachi wa, kazoku no hi desu.</i> In Japan, the 1st of January is a family day.	Teacher outlines Japanese practice expressed in values.
Student 4	<i>Kurisumasu wa kazoku no hi desu.</i> Christmas is our family day.	Students reciprocate, make own values visible to teacher.
Teacher	(English) why is it the opposite?	Teacher poses enquiry question.
Student 5	(pause) Because there's more Christians?	Student deduces possible explanation.
Teacher	<i>Natsu ni, nihonjin wa yama ni ikimasu. Oosutorarianjin wa natsu ni, yama ni ikimasu ka?</i> In the summer, Japanese people go to the mountains. Do Australians go to the mountains in summer?	Teacher outlines Japanese practice, asks for information about Australian practice.
Students	<i>Iie, umi ni ikimasu</i> No, to the beach!	Students express own practice, made visible to them.
Teacher	What's a traditional Australian costume?	Teacher asks for info about Australian practice.
Students	(long pause) A cork-screw hat? (students laugh)	Students unable to answer, so resort to stereotype image of Australian, as joke.

Table 6: Extract from transcript of Japanese lesson.

Vignette 3: Spanish

Lesson Overview

A Year 8 Spanish lesson required students to think through processes for meeting and greeting, when visiting people for dinner in Spain. Moving between Spanish and English, the teacher drew out cultural similarities and differences at the 'intercultural reflection points' and allowed students time to tell stories from their own prior experience and to ask questions. The Spanish teacher had emigrated to Australia and so can assume the stance of an 'outsider'. At the 'intercultural reflection point' of the lesson she requested that the students' explain the Australian practice of meeting and greeting when inviting people for dinner to their home. In the extract below, the teachers asks the students to imagine the language and etiquette that would be used at the end of a similar dinner party in Australia, and to use this framework to identify what expected elements are "missing" in the Spanish language.

In Table 7, we see an example of the integration of the five dimensions of Scarino et al. (2009). Students are visibly making linguistic connections and moving between cultures, and we can see them achieving these outcomes by communicating in the target language, demonstrating their understanding of how language works, and how language choices shape meaning, the multiple processes involved in communicating, and developing awareness as Australian users of Spanish. Again the teacher could examine whether 4.MBC.2 "a student demonstrates knowledge of key features of the culture of Spanish-speaking communities" (Board of Studies NSW, 2003, p. 41) is visible here, looking particularly to see whether the students have learned about "ways in which language and behavior reflect important aspects of the culture" (Board of Studies NSW, 2003, p. 41).

	Text and translation	Interpretation
Teacher	“ <i>Vale. Nos llamamos y citamos</i> – we’ll ring you.. and we’ll fix a date.” So, what’s not in here? What’s missing?	Teacher asks students to compare language behavior in the Spanish context to their knowledge of typical language behavior in an equivalent Australian context.
Student 1	Bye!	Student identifies “missing” language.
Teacher	<i>Adios, yep.</i> What else is missing?	Teacher demands more observation.
Student 2	Thank you.	Student identifies “missing” language.
Teacher	Thank you. There is no way of thanking. <i>No hay palabra que dice ‘muchas gracias’. Hay ‘mucho gusto’ y ‘encantado’ que son muy respetuosos. Pero en ningun momento se dice ‘gracias’. (muffles) Que mas no hay?</i> (What else is not there?)	Teacher confirms, elaborates. Teacher demands more observation.
Student 3	<i>Por favor.</i>	Student identifies “missing” language.
Teacher	<i>Si. ‘Por favor.’ No hay ‘por favor’, no hay ‘gracias’. Pero os pregunto, pensais que esta gente esta amable o que no tiene educacion?</i> No “please”, no “thank you”. Do you think they are like polite or impolite?	Teacher confirms, elaborates. Asks students to make deduction as to meaning of Spanish behavior.
Student 4	Polite.	Student deduces Spanish behaviour.
Teacher	Ya. Polite. But they don’t say thank you and they don’t say please. So, how do they express the politeness and the respect?	Teacher asks students to identify other meaningful behaviours. (understand how language works, processes involved in communicating)
Students 5	Compliments.	Student identifies a behaviour which communicates meaning.
Teacher	Compliments. <i>Hacen complimentos. Que mas?</i>	Teacher asks students to identify further meaningful behaviours.
Student 6	They invite them to their house?	Student identifies another behaviour which communicates meaning.
Teacher	Yeah. So they invite them over. That’s very typical in Spain. Before you leave you say “Oh how about you come to our house in two weeks? <i>Nos vemos en dos semanas.</i> ”	Teacher confirms and supports student understanding of relationship between behavior, meaning and language.

Table 7. Extract from transcript of Spanish lesson.

In the focus group following this lesson, students added their further analysis of the meaning of the different usage of the term “thank you”:

Student CG: ... you don’t really need to say please and thank you as much in Spain. Like we say it almost unnecessarily.

Student SW: Yeah, it was strange because we say it so much, so it seemed kind of odd.

Student CG: It was just kind of a habit for us to say it, but for them they only say it when it’s absolutely necessary, which is probably because then it’s more meaningful. The less you say it, the more significant it is.

The lesson excerpt transcript indicates that through social interaction the students work out how both the Australian and the Spanish indicate their appreciation. The focus group shows students making this even more visible. The students are able to de-center from their own practice of

expressing gratitude by saying the words for thank you, and can perceive the meaning and value in the Spanish practice. They go beyond this, as they critique the possible insincerity of their own practice and suggest that the Spanish practice may be more meaningful than their own. They manipulate this cultural information and come up with a transformation of their perception:

“The less you say [thank you], the more significant it is” represents that student’s interpretation, where cultural information has been manipulated to transform its meaning for the student. Again we stress that recall sessions at strategic points in the lesson sequence can give students adequate opportunity to analyse their language learning, shedding light on what they now know about processes of language learning.

The visible intercultural learning lies in the recognition of the meaning of the Spanish behaviours, and in knowing that not saying something is culturally very appropriate. These students are offering evidence of their understanding of how language choices create meaning, and of the processes involved in communicating. The teacher set up a follow-up task which asked them to create their own Spanish dinner dialogue, an opportunity for them to demonstrate this learning in performance.

11 Discussion

In the vignettes chosen, evidence can be seen of students actively building on their prior knowledge and cultural perspectives, displaying higher order thinking and problem-solving skills, and demonstrating metacognitive development, self-monitoring of their learning and thinking. Examples from the data offer evidence of visible intercultural learning in the five dimensions as suggested by Scarino et al. (2009).

Vignette 1 highlights how language teachers can, through planning tasks for social interaction, support learners to construct visible performance of their intercultural language learning in the target language. The Italian students are assisted in their construction of their responses, to understand how language works, making linguistic connections. Italian students also demonstrate their understanding of processes involved in communicating. Liddicoat et al. (2003) refer to the functions involved in intercultural reflection as involving “the capability to reflect on and engage with difference ... question stereotypes, and develop a metalanguage for discussing the relationship between language and culture” (Liddicoat et al., 2003, p. 50). These students are being asked to “decentre from their own cultural perspective” and to develop an understanding of the “naturalness of multiple perspectives” (Liddicoat et al., 2003, p. 51).

The Japanese students of Vignette 2, are developing reflective self-awareness and multiple perspectives as language users, as they struggle with the insight necessary to move between cultures. The Spanish students of Vignette 3 discover how behavior and language choices both contribute to the shaping of meaning, and how the relationship between culture and language works. The teachers show their ability to elicit from learners their understandings of language structures and processes.

Teachers can specifically plan for such visible discovery and analysis. Scarino et al. (2009) would have us remember, however, that teacher interpretation of student learning is the crux of the matter. Similar to the focus group research strategies we utilized, making the learning visible so that interpretation can occur is a strategy that we maintain can be developed by teachers as part of their teaching repertoire. Teachers are being challenged to design a new approach for the observation of intercultural language learning. This calls for the recognition of new forms of evidence of learning.

The practice of the Spanish teacher may provide useful further perspectives. The teacher reported that she looks for a variety of evidence of intercultural learning in student performance. This includes evaluation of visible learning in role-plays and writing tasks, such as might follow on from the Spanish dinner party lesson of Vignette 3. The teacher reports (pers. comm.) that she looks at intercultural language learning

not so much by what language they are using, but sometimes by the language they are not using. For instance, not including “thank you”, not translating an idea from English direct into Spanish. I am listening (or reading) for the use of idiom and “real” sounding Spanish, or, for example, for attempting to include little typical scenarios like when you are being offered more food, the ritual of refusing, offering again, and accepting. Or when the guest is trying to depart, they are persuaded to stay longer.”

Using the five categories of Scarino et al. (2009), we could interpret the teacher’s comments as looking at students’ work, for visible evidence of them communicating interculturally, that is, with understanding of how language works, how language choices contribute to make meaning, and with some self-awareness as Spanish users.

12 Conclusion

The belief that a new form of learning is visible is crucial for teachers’ acceptance and implementation of an intercultural orientation. Teachers are engaged in developing innovative practice which elicits and recognizes evidence of new student learning. These initiatives will shape and support the future development of intercultural language learning.

This paper set out to investigate whether intercultural learning in language students could be made visible. We also asked whether the design of this methodology itself could be one of several new strategies for teachers themselves to employ to observe their students’ achievements in intercultural language learning.

The analysis of the data above, the lesson transcripts, students’ perceptions, and researchers’ interpretations as a result of their observations, shows evidence of students in the process of ‘becoming intercultural’, as a new kind of student learning is taking place in language classrooms. This learning is visible to the students themselves as we discovered when we posed strategic questions to them about what and how they learned, visible to the teacher and visible to us as researchers.

The data collection methodology of this study made it possible to demonstrate that visible intercultural language learning involves:

- Students using both the target language and English in social interaction to express opinions, problem-solve, use high-order thinking;
- Students actively testing and engaging their prior knowledge, that is, their existing cultural knowledge and expectations;
- Students developing their analysis of how language works, and of the processes involved in communication; and
- Students with self-awareness of their own identity as adolescent Australians and as intercultural communicators

If teachers can continue to interrogate the syllabus notions of Moving Between Cultures (MBC) and Making Linguistic Connections (MLC), informed strategies will recognize student abilities to both produce and understand texts with intercultural learning.

The evidence of this learning must be valued and acknowledged. The descriptive interpretive methodology employed by the researchers, even in a small scale and short term study, enabled a variety of evidence of learning to be collected, and models the approach which can also be taken by teachers to collect evidence of intercultural language learning in classrooms.

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