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## Language, Culture and Learning

### What is language?

#### KEY IDEAS

- Language is more than just the code: it also involves social practices of interpreting and making meanings
- The way we teach language reflects the way we understand language
- What is learned in the language classroom, and what students can learn, results from the teacher's understandings of language
- There is a fundamental relationship between language and culture
- It is important to consider how language as code and language as social practice are balanced in the curriculum

## Understanding language

Language is at the heart of language teaching and learning and teachers need to constantly reflect on what language is. This is because our understandings of language affect the ways we teach languages.

## Language as code

Traditionally, language is viewed as a code. In this view, language is made up of words and a series of rules that connect words together. If language is only viewed in this way, language learning just involves learning vocabulary and the rules for constructing sentences. This understanding of language is, however, a very narrow one. It sees language as fixed and finite and does not explore the complexities involved in using language for communication.

## Language as social practice

An understanding of language as 'open, dynamic, energetic, constantly evolving and personal' (Shohamy, 2007:5) encompasses the rich complexities of communication. This expanded view of language also makes educational experience more engaging for students. Language is not a thing to be studied but a way of seeing, understanding and communicating about the world and each language user uses his or her language(s) differently to do this. People use language for purposeful communication and learning a new language involves learning how to use words, rules and knowledge about language and its use in order to communicate with speakers of the language. This understanding of language sees a language not simply as a body of knowledge to be learnt but as a social practice in which to participate (Kramsch, 1994). Language is something that people do in their daily lives and something they use to express, create and interpret meanings and to establish and maintain social and interpersonal relationships.

If language is a social practice of meaning-making and interpretation, then it is not enough for language learners just to know grammar and vocabulary. They also need to know how that language is used to create and represent meanings and how to communicate with others and to engage with the communication of others. This requires the development of awareness of the nature of language and its impact on the world (Svalberg, 2007).

Our understanding of language, as languages educators, becomes part of our professional stance and, as such, influences our curriculum, planning and classroom pedagogies. Teachers who view language simply as code make acquiring grammar and vocabulary the primary, if not the only, goal of language learning. Within such a limited approach, students do not begin to engage with language as a communicative reality but simply as an intellectual exercise or as a work requiring memorising.



A professional stance that understands language as a social practice requires students to engage in tasks in which they create and interpret meaning, and in which they communicate their own personal meanings and develop personal connections with the new language.



The understanding of language that is part of our stance also affects what happens in the classroom and the ways in which learners begin to understand the relationship between their own languages and the languages of their learning. If the language learning program focuses on the code, then it models a theory of language in which the relationship between two languages is simply a matter of code replacement, where the only difference is a difference in words. If the language pedagogies focus on the interpretation and creation of meaning, language is learned as a system of personal engagement with a new world, where learners necessarily engage with diversity at a personal level.

Within a professional stance that understands language as a social practice, teachers need to ensure that students are provided with opportunities to go beyond what they already know and to learn to engage with unplanned and unpredictable aspects of language. Learning language as a complex, personal communication system involves ongoing investigation of language as a dynamic system and of the way it works to create and convey meanings. This involves learners in analysis and in talking analytically about language. Kramsch (1993:264) notes that: 'talk about talk is what the classroom does best and yet this potential source of knowledge has not been sufficiently tapped, even in communicatively oriented classrooms'. The emphasis on ongoing investigation and analysis assumes that learners are involved in learning which promotes exploration and discovery rather than only being passive recipients of knowledge as it is transmitted to them by others. These learners require learning skills which will give them independence as users and analysers of language (Svalberg, 2007).

## Language and culture

Understanding the nature of the relationship between language and culture is central to the process of learning another language. In actual language use, it is not the case that it is only the forms of language that convey meaning. It is language in its cultural context that creates meaning: creating and interpreting meaning is done within a cultural framework. In language learning classrooms, learners need to engage with the ways in which context affects what is communicated and how. Both the learner's culture and the culture in which meaning is created or communicated have an influence on the ways in which possible meanings are understood. This context is not a single culture as both the target language and culture and the learner's own language and culture are simultaneously present and can be simultaneously engaged. Learning to communicate in an additional language involves developing an awareness of the ways in which culture interrelates with language whenever it is used (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, & Kohler, 2003).

## A matter of balance

In developing a professional stance to language teaching, it is important to consider how language as code and language as social practice are balanced in the curriculum. In developing language capabilities, students need to develop their knowledge and understanding of the code and also to come to see language as a way of communicating between people. Both of these goals need to be present in language teaching and learning from the beginning.

### Questions for reflection

- 1 Consider the tasks you have used for a particular class or module. What do these tasks show about what you have been emphasising in your own teaching? Do these show a balance between treating language as a code and as a social practice of meaning-making and interpreting?
- 2 How might you develop new tasks for use in the classroom which present a more balanced or more elaborated understanding of language?

# What is culture?

## KEY IDEAS

- Culture can be seen as practices or as information
- Culture plays a central role in the way meanings are interpreted
- Cultures are characterised by variability and diversity
- The intercultural is not the same as culture but is a process which goes beyond the idea of 'knowing a culture'
- Culture is fundamentally related to language

The way in which we understand culture, just as the way we understand language, affects the way we teach culture in language learning. In developing our stance, there are two fundamentally connected issues to consider:

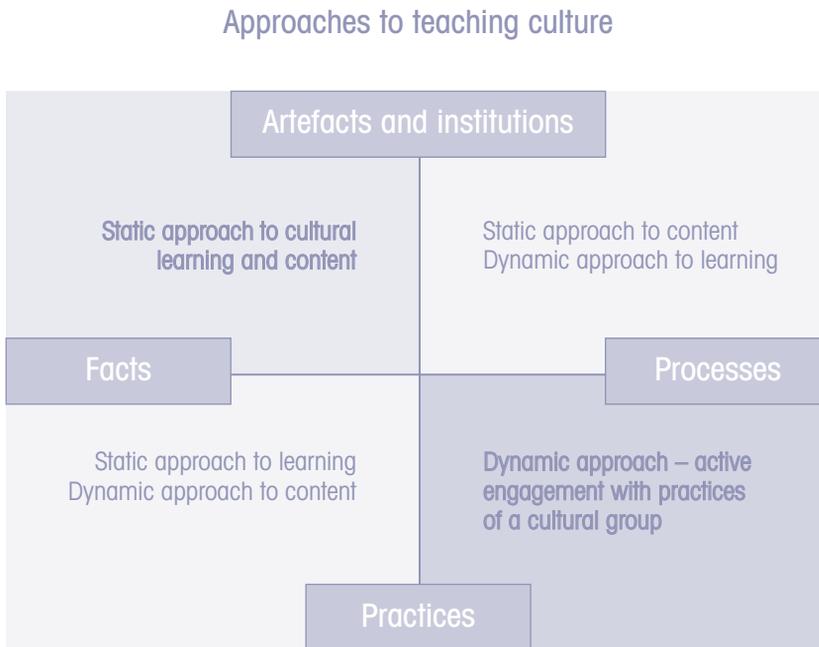
- what we understand culture to be
- how we understand the place of culture within language learning.

## Understanding culture

One way in which culture has often been understood is as a body of knowledge that people have about a particular society. This body of knowledge can be seen in various ways: as knowledge about cultural artefacts or works of art; as knowledge about places and institutions; as knowledge about events and symbols; or as knowledge about ways of living. It is also possible to consider this aspect of culture in terms of information and to teach the culture as if it were a set of the learnable rules which can be mastered by students. When translated into language teaching and learning, this knowledge-based view of culture often takes the form of teaching information about another country, its people, its institutions, and so on. Culture is not, however, simply a body of knowledge but rather a framework in which people live their lives and communicate shared meanings with each other.

## Static and dynamic learning approaches to culture

In thinking about how to teach culture in the language classroom, it is useful to consider how the ways in which culture is presented can be categorised. The diagram below (adapted from Liddicoat, 2005) is one way of thinking this through.



One dimension is the axis of culture as facts or as processes: that is, whether culture is seen as a static body of information about characteristics of a society or as a dynamic system through which a society constructs, represents, enacts and understands itself. The second axis represents the way in which culture is conceived in terms of educational content. It makes a distinction between artefacts and institutions and practices: that is, whether culture is seen in terms of the things produced by a society or as the things said and done by members of a society.

The most static way to approach the teaching of a culture typically emphasises artefacts, institutions and factual knowledge. Both the approach to culture learning and the content itself are static. The lower left quadrant adopts a static approach to the nature of learning, but a more dynamic approach to the content, whereas the top right quadrant is static in terms of its content, but dynamic in terms of its approach to learning (eg as in activities in which learners engaged with cultural artefacts in a hands on way). The most dynamic approach to culture is represented by the lower right hand quadrant, which sees learners actively engage with the practices of a cultural group.

## The intercultural dimension

Knowledge of cultures is important for facilitating communication with people. Therefore learners of languages need to learn about and understand cultures. Understanding culture as practices with which people engage becomes centrally important. This means that in the language classroom it is not just a question of learners developing knowledge about another culture but of learners coming to understand themselves in relation to some other culture. This is why there is a contemporary emphasis on 'intercultural'. Learning to be intercultural involves much more than just knowing about another culture: it involves learning to understand how one's own culture shapes perceptions of oneself, of the world, and of our relationship with others. Learners need to become familiar with how they can personally engage with linguistic and cultural diversity.

There is another way to think about culture in language teaching: the distinction between a cultural perspective and an intercultural perspective (Liddicoat, 2005).

This 'cultural' pole implies the development of knowledge about culture which remains external to the learner and is not intended to confront or transform the learner's existing identity, practices, values, attitudes, beliefs and worldview. The 'intercultural' pole implies the transformational engagement of the learner in the act of learning.

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The goal of learning is to decentre learners from their own culture-based assumptions and to develop an intercultural identity as a result of an engagement with an additional culture. Here the borders between self and other are explored, problematised and redrawn.

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Taking an intercultural perspective in language teaching and learning involves more than developing knowledge of other people and places. It means learning that all human beings are shaped by their cultures and that communicating across cultures involves accepting both one's own culturally conditioned nature and that of others and the ways in which these are at play in communication. Learning another language can be like placing a mirror up to one's own culture and one's own assumptions about how communication happens, what particular messages mean and what assumptions one makes in one's daily life. Effective intercultural learning therefore occurs as the student engages in the relationships between the cultures that are at play in the language classroom. Such learning involves much more than just developing knowledge about some other culture and its language.

The intercultural framework proposed here, then, consists of three intersecting dimensions for understanding approaches to the teaching of culture in language learning:

- the nature of content: artefact-practice
- the nature of learning: fact-process
- the nature of the educational effect: cultural-intercultural.

In learning about culture in the language classroom, we need to draw on our own experiences of language and culture as they are encountered when trying to create and interpret meanings. The ability to learn beyond the classroom is probably more important than any particular information that students may learn about another culture during their schooling. This is because it is impossible to teach *all* of any culture because cultures are variable and diverse. As language educators, we know that what we can teach in the classroom is inevitably only a partial picture of a language and culture. By acknowledging that limitation in our own teaching, we are less likely to develop stereotypical views of the cultures we are teaching about. Learning how to learn about culture means that, as people engage with new aspects of culture, they develop their knowledge and awareness and find ways of acting according to their new learning.

One way of developing intercultural capabilities is through an interconnected set of activities involving:

- noticing cultural similarities and differences as they are made evident through language
- comparing what one has noticed about another language and culture with what one already knows about other languages and cultures
- reflecting on what one's experience of linguistic and cultural diversity means for oneself: how one reacts to diversity, how one thinks about diversity, how one feels about diversity and how one will find ways of engaging constructively with diversity
- interacting on the basis of one's learning and experiences of diversity in order to create personal meanings about one's experiences, communicate those meanings, explore those meanings and reshape them in response to others.

A dynamic relationship between language and culture is always at play. It is through exploration of the interactions of language and culture that this awareness and the ability to act on it can be developed.

### **Questions for reflection**

- 1 Collect the tasks you have used to teach and assess culture for a particular class or module. What do these tasks show about the way you have presented culture in your teaching? Do they show that you have used culture explicitly to develop the interculturality of your learners or do they show a focus on acquiring information about others? Do these tasks explicitly include opportunities for activities such as noticing, comparing, reflecting and interacting?
- 2 How significantly does your stance as a languages educator focus on interculturality?
- 3 How might you modify your teaching to focus more on developing the ability to learn how to learn?
- 4 How would you explain intercultural language learning to parents?

# Understanding learning

## KEY IDEAS

- There are changing views about learning in general and languages in particular in contemporary education
- The learning theories that teachers hold implicitly or explicitly influence their teaching, learning and assessment practices
- Theories of learning have changed from behaviourism to cognitive and sociocultural theories. They have been described through acquisition and participation metaphors and it is recognised that both are needed
- Language, culture and learning together form the basis for the languages curriculum

## Rationale for considering learning theories

In thinking about teaching, learning and assessing in languages education, it is essential for us to consider the understandings that we hold and the assumptions that we make about learning. This is because these understandings, be they implicit or explicit, influence our professional stance as language educators and our teaching, learning and assessment practices. Our understandings of learning are not simply acquired as knowledge that is put into practice; rather, they develop over time and in diverse contexts working with diverse students, based on ongoing experience and reflection.

In such an ongoing process, often 'dominant theories of the past continue to operate as the default framework affecting and driving current practices and perspectives' (Shepard, 2000:4). Thus, it is important to have a sense of past theories as well as more contemporary conceptualisations of learning as a basis for examining understandings and assumptions about how students learn. Teachers as social beings construct the world of teaching and learning according to their values and dispositions. As such, their biographies are central to what they see and how they interpret their world. As Shepard points out, changing conceptions of learning

are closely entwined with changing conceptions of curriculum and assessment. She observes that, at present, there is a mismatch between current views of learning on the one hand, and teaching and assessment practices on the other. This mismatch warrants further consideration in each particular context of teaching and learning.

Some teachers find engaging with theory to be of limited direct value and prefer to focus on practice. Theory versus practice dichotomies do not reflect current understandings as theory and practice are not seen as opposites. Contemporary understandings show that there is an important relationship between the two: a good theory can be immensely practical, just as excellent practice informs theory-making. It is learning theory that provides big picture understandings when teachers wish to reconsider and potentially change their practices.

## Theories of learning

### Behaviourism

Behaviourism, one of the most pervasive theories of learning in the 1940s and 1950s was based on stimulus-response associations. Its focus is on *observable* behaviour rather than thinking. Learning within this theory entails the accumulation of atomised bits of knowledge that are sequenced and ordered hierarchically. Each item of knowledge (called 'objectives' in curriculums and programs) is to be learned independently on the assumption that this makes learning more manageable. All the constituent parts of learning are to be mastered before proceeding to the next part (objective) in the hierarchy, gradually leading to a complex whole. In this theory, learning is seen as developing associations between stimuli and responses. Motivation involves positive reinforcement of the many small steps in learning and forming good habits. Development is seen as occurring through a series of required stages, in a step-by-step process.

The major concerns with this theory are that:

- learning is broken down into ever-smaller, analytic parts that are no longer integrated to form a whole
- learning entails much more than a response to a stimulus
- learning is task and context dependent.

## Cognitive theories

The various cognitive theories, which challenged behaviourism, introduced the concept of a thinking mind. Learning within these theories is understood as a process of active construction whereby each individual makes sense of new information in his/her mind by mapping it onto his/her existing framework of knowledge and understanding. The incorporation of new knowledge leads to a restructuring of the individual's conceptual map. These theories also highlight the fact that learning is context-dependent – that is, 'situated' – and that new knowledge can only be taken in when connected to existing knowledge structures. In this sense, learning involves a process of making connections – reorganising unrelated bits of knowledge and experience into new patterns, integrated wholes. Students learn by relating new experiences to what they already know. Learning involves making new meanings which are generally expressed through language. In this way learning, language, meaning and thinking are closely related. Within this perspective, beyond the accumulation and restructuring of information, developing knowledge involves developing processes of self-monitoring and awareness that we refer to as metacognition.

## Sociocultural theories

Whereas cognitive theories highlight thinking as it occurs *in the mind of the individual*, sociocultural theories consider the relationship between thinking and the social, cultural, historical and institutional context in which it occurs. The rediscovery of the work of Vygotsky (1978) has led to the understanding that learning and development are culturally embedded and socially supported or mediated processes. As Lantolf, one of the major researchers who has developed sociocultural theory in the field of applied linguistics, explains:

“ Sociocultural theory holds that specifically human forms of mental activity arise in the interactions we enter into with other members of our culture and with the specific experiences we have with the artefacts produced by our ancestors and by our contemporaries. Rather than dichotomising the mental and the social, the theory insists on a seamless and dialectic relationship between these two domains. In other words, not only does our mental activity determine the nature of our social world, but this world of human relationships and artefacts also determines to a large extent how we regulate our mental processes.

(Lantolf, 2000:79)

Learning according to this theory is developed through *social interaction* with more knowledgeable or more proficient others. This social process of interaction (through language, as well as other systems and tools such as gestures, narratives, technologies) *mediates* the construction of knowledge and leads to the individual's development of a framework for making sense of experience that is congruent with the cultural system in which the learner and learning are located. It is through this social and cultural process that students are socialised to act, communicate and 'be' in ways that are culturally appropriate to the groups in which they participate as members, and through which identities are formed.

Within sociocultural theories, development occurs twice: firstly in the process of social interaction (that is, on an *interpersonal* plane) and then within the mind of the individual (that is, on an *intrapersonal* plane). *Language is integral to learning in that it is the major means by which we make and share meanings with ourselves and with others, and by which we negotiate social relationships and social values.* It is language that makes it possible for people to objectify and conceptualise themselves in the world – to give names to experiences, and make sense of the environment, objects, experiences, events and interactions. In short, language is central to the process of conceiving meaning, which is integral to learning.

Sociocultural theory is concerned with the *development* of individuals over time. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning is not fixed but dynamic and developmental. In this sense, the developmental focus is on an individual's *potential* abilities. An individual's learning potential depends fundamentally on mediation – that is, learning support or scaffolds that are made available. These scaffolds might include reminders, examples, models, graphics, illustrations, explanations, further questions and elaborations, as well as encouragement. They are designed to move the learning forward in the zone of proximal development. An individual's learning and achievement are mediated by supportive interactions with others. This interaction is fundamental to learning. To understand learners' learning and potential development, it's important to take into account both what they are able to do independently and what they can do, with others, in and through social interaction – what they are able to do at any particular time and what they continue to learn to do over time.

The cultural dimension of sociocultural theories of learning is highlighted by Gee.



A sociocultural approach places a premium on learners' experiences, social participation, use of mediating devices (tools and technologies), and position within various activity systems and communities of practice. The word 'culture' has taken on a wide variety of different meanings in different disciplines. Nonetheless, it is clear that as part and parcel of our early socialisation in life, we each learn ways of being in the world, of acting, and interacting, thinking and valuing and using language, objects and tools that critically shape our early sense of self. A situated/sociocultural perspective amounts to an argument that students learn new academic 'cultures' at school (new ways of acting, interacting, valuing and using language, objects and tools) and, as in the case of acquiring any new culture, the acquisition of these new cultures interacts formidably with learners' initial cultures.

(Gee, 2008:100)



Thus the diverse cultural understanding and experiences that students bring are highly influential and need to be taken into account. The implication of this for us as a profession is that we need to enlarge our understanding of learners, recognise the extraordinary differences in their social and cultural life-worlds, experiences, motivations, aspirations, and incorporate this diversity into our teaching and learning.

### **Merged theories**

While there is much debate within and among cognitive, constructivist and sociocultural theories, Shepard (2000:6), among others, maintains that it is some kind of combined or 'merged' theory that will end up being 'accepted as common wisdom and carried into practice'. Learning, then, is socially constructed, mediated through language and other tools that are congruent with the culture in which the learner and learning are situated, and develops over time. As Broadfoot says:



What we can and should do is ... recognise that learners are first and foremost sentient beings and, hence, that the quality and scope of their learning is likely to be at least as closely related to their feelings and beliefs about it as it is to their intellectual capacity.



(Broadfoot, 2005:138–139)

Students bring with them their own conceptions, misconceptions, understandings, experiences and feelings that shape their learning.

### **Acquisition and participation**

Anna Sfard (1998) discusses learning theory through two metaphors: an acquisition metaphor and a participation metaphor. Learning within the acquisition metaphor involves the accumulation of a body of facts or items of knowledge that are abstracted and generalised. The process may involve either reception or development by construction, but the focus is on ‘gaining ownership’ (Sfard, 1998:5) or possession of something. Within the participation metaphor, learning involves participating within a community of more knowledgeable others to construct understanding. Participation takes place in the context of culture through social mediation. The focus within this metaphor is not on possession but on participation in various kinds of activities characteristic of a learning area as the learner gradually becomes a member of the subject community. Sfard highlights that ‘each (metaphor) has something to offer that the other cannot provide’ (Sfard, 1998:10).

### **Questions for reflection**

- 1 How does your stance to language learning reflect your views on learning?
- 2 Where do your views on learning come from?
- 3 How are your views of learning evident in your teaching and assessment practice?
- 4 What are some implications of these learning theories for your own teaching?
- 5 Why do you think Sfard emphasises the merging of the two metaphors?
- 6 Are there dimensions of learning that are not captured by the acquisition and participation metaphors?

# Understanding language learning

## KEY IDEAS

- Second language acquisition and learning theories need to account for language learning by learners from diverse life-worlds, learning with diverse needs, interests, motivations and desires in diverse contexts
- Intercultural language teaching and learning focuses on the relationship between language, culture and learning
- Using languages, hence learning languages, is:
  - an intrapersonal and interpersonal process of meaning-making
  - interactional
  - developmental/dynamic
  - interpretive, imaginative and creative

## Second language learning

Theories that have been developed to account for second language learning, or acquisition, are closely related to those discussed above as general learning theories.

A behaviourist approach to second language learning focuses on imitation, practice, encouragement and habit formation. Learning a second language necessarily involves comparison with the learner's first language, but the latter is generally perceived as causing 'interference' in the learning of additional one(s). This approach is seen now to offer an insufficient explanation of the complexity of language learning.

The linguist Noam Chomsky (1957) provided a major critique of behaviourism and its view of second language learning as imitation and habit formation. He developed a theory of first language learning that suggests that language learning is an innate capacity – that children are programmed to acquire language thanks to their in-built knowledge of a Universal Grammar. He called this knowledge 'competence', to distinguish it from what might actually be said on a particular occasion.

For Chomsky, this abstract knowledge of language consists of a limited set of rules that enabled an infinite number of sentences to be constructed. While he did not specifically address second language learning, his theory has been applied to it.

With regard to teaching methodology, behaviourism can be linked to grammar/translation methods that tend to focus on the parts of grammatical knowledge with less attention on how these parts might be brought together in communication. The audiovisual and audio-lingual approaches were based on stimulus-response psychology – that is, training students through practising patterns to form ‘habits’.

One of the most influential of the innatist theories (ie theories that argue that language is innate, is that of Stephen Krashen and it is this theory that influenced communicative language teaching (for more information, see Lightblown & Spada, 1999, Chapter 2).

Within cognitive theories of second language acquisition, learning involves building up the knowledge system or architecture which over time and through practice becomes automatically accessible in reception and production. Some theorists within the cognitivist tradition have argued that interaction is essential for language learning to take place, with the modification of input, by teachers for example, to render it comprehensible to the learner (see Long, 1983).

The sociocultural perspective on second language learning, based on the work of Vygotsky (1978), highlights that all learning, including language learning, is based on social interaction (see Lantolf, 2000) with more proficient others, on an interpersonal and intrapersonal plane as described above. Through the concept of the zone of proximal development, it highlights that language learning is developmental. The characteristic of ‘prior knowledge’ is very important. It recognises that new learning is built on prior learning – that is, the ideas and concepts that students bring to learning. Teachers work with these preconceptions in order to facilitate learning.

The characteristic of ‘metacognition’, or awareness about how we learn, is integral to learning. Students need to understand how they learn. They need to continuously reflect on their learning and develop self-awareness of themselves as learners. There is a strong connection between learning and identity: learners need to negotiate constantly who they are, and how they can be/ should be/ would like to be in the language and culture they are learning.

## The role of language

The role of language in learning cannot be over-emphasised. Language is the prime resource teachers have and use for mediating learning. When learning languages, then, teachers and students are working with language simultaneously as an object of study and as a medium for learning. In teaching languages, the target language is not simply a new code – new labels for the same concepts; rather, effectively taught, the new language and culture being learned offer the opportunity for learning new concepts and new ways of understanding the world.

While these theories of second language learning provide insights on aspects of second language learning, there is no comprehensive or ‘complete’ theory that can guide the practices of teaching and learning. Nonetheless, this does not mean that ‘anything goes’. Rather, it becomes necessary for teachers to become aware of and understand what they do and why, by examining their own, often tacit, theories about learning in relation to insights from current and best theories, and by considering the implications of these for teaching. Both teachers and students need to develop a rich conception of what language and culture are and do, and how they interrelate to interpret and create meaning.

### Questions for reflection

- 1 How do you elicit and use students’ prior knowledge?
- 2 How do you understand ‘metacognition’ and how would you discuss this with your students?
- 3 How does your current stance on languages teaching reflect differing, and perhaps oppositional, aspects of the theories discussed in this section?

# Intercultural language learning

## KEY IDEAS

- The intercultural orientation to language learning is intended to give salience to:
  - the fundamental integration of language, culture and learning in learning and using any language, and
  - the reality of at least two languages being constantly at play in learning an additional language
- Intercultural language learning can be considered through five principles:
  - active construction, making connections, interaction, reflection and responsibility

A stance to languages teaching that has intercultural language learning at its heart involves developing with students an understanding of their own 'situatedness' in their own language and culture, and the recognition of the same in others. It also involves understanding the way in which this recognition influences the process of communication within their own language and culture, and across languages and cultures. Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino and Kohler describe it as follows.



Intercultural language learning involves developing with learners an understanding of their own language(s) and culture(s) in relation to an additional language and culture. It is a dialogue that allows for reaching a common ground for negotiation to take place, and where variable points of view are recognised, mediated, and accepted.

Learners engaged in intercultural language learning develop a reflective stance towards language and culture, both specifically as instances of first, second, and additional languages and cultures, and generally as understandings of the variable ways in which language and culture exist in the world.

(Liddicoat et al, 2003:46)



Through intercultural language learning, students engage with and learn to understand and interpret human communication and interaction in increasingly sophisticated ways. They do so both as participants in communication and as observers who notice, describe, analyse and interpret ideas, experiences and feelings shared when communicating with others. In doing so, they engage with interpreting their own and others' meanings, with each experience of participation and reflection leading to a greater awareness of self in relation to others. The ongoing interactive exchange of meanings, and the reflection on both the meanings exchanged and the process of interaction, are an integral part of life in our world. As such, intercultural language learning is best understood not as something to be added to teaching and learning but rather something that is integral to the interactions that already (and inevitably) takes place in the classroom and beyond.

Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino and Kohler (2003) propose a set of five principles which provide a starting point for developing intercultural language learning, as shown in the (adapted) table on page 35.

### **Questions for reflection**

- 1 How would you describe intercultural language learning to a colleague who is new to teaching languages?
- 2 What do you see as implications of the five principles for your teaching?

## Principles for developing intercultural language learning

|   |                     |  |
|---|---------------------|--|
| 1 | Active construction | Learning involves purposeful, active engagement in interpreting and creating meaning in interaction with others, and continuously reflecting on one's self and others in communication and meaning-making in variable contexts. For students, it is more than a process of absorption of facts but continuously developing as thinking, feeling, changing intercultural beings.  |
| 2 | Making connections  | <p>Learning is developed firstly through social interactions (<i>interpersonally</i>) and then internally within the mind of the individual (<i>intrapersonally</i>). In the interpersonal process previous knowledge is challenged, creating new insights through which students connect, reorganise, elaborate and extend their understanding. In this process, constant connections are made between:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• language and culture and learning</li> <li>• existing conceptions – new understandings</li> <li>• language and thinking</li> <li>• first language – additional language(s)</li> <li>• previous experiences – new experiences</li> <li>• the intercultural self – intracultural self – others.</li> </ul> |
| 3 | Interaction         | Learning and communication are social and interactive. Interacting and communicating intercultural means continuously developing one's understanding of the relationship between one's own framework of language and culture and that of others. In interaction, participants engage in a continuous dialogue in negotiating meaning across variable perspectives held by diverse participants, and continuously learn from and build upon the experience.   |
| 4 | Reflection          | Learning involves becoming aware of how we think, know and learn about language (first and additional), culture, knowing, understanding and their relationship as well as concepts such as diversity, identity, experiences and one's own intercultural thoughts and feelings.   |
| 5 | Responsibility      | Learning depends on learners' attitudes, dispositions and values, developed over time. In communication, it involves accepting responsibility for one's way of interacting with others within and across languages and for striving continuously to better understand self and others in the ongoing development of intercultural sensitivity.   |

## Summary

Taking the above discussion into account, some key dimensions of language learning include the following.

- Learning is both *intrapersonal* (ie takes place within the individual) and *interpersonal* (ie accomplished socially in interaction with others). It is also personal in the sense of pertaining to the person, shaping who they are and their identity. The most important point here is that learning is about personal meaning-making – how children and young people make meaning within themselves and with others, in and through learning.
- Learning is developmental – that is, a continuous process where students engage with increasing complexity.
- Learning builds on prior knowledge and cannot occur without attending to students' prior conceptions/misconceptions.
- Learning is interactive where interaction is focused on meaning-making.

Learning is mediated primarily through language – all the languages of the students' repertoires.

- Feedback is critical to learning – students need to know where they stand and what they need to do and understand in order to take the next steps in their learning.
- Learning involves transfer; it needs to be applied in diverse contexts. Through use in different situations, with different participants etc, students learn how to adjust their learning to the particular local context, circumstances and requirements.
- Learning is self-awareness and relates to metacognition (ie learners being aware of how they learn, and why they learn as they do).

These characteristics of learning are also features of *intercultural* language learning.

An expanded view of learning and using languages in the context of culture recognises these as intra- and interpersonal processes of meaning-making: interactional, developmental, interpretive, imaginative and creative. The implication for teaching is, fundamentally, that learning extends beyond 'exposure' to focus on interaction and the life-worlds of all people involved. As such, it is a 'peopled' view of language learning.

### Questions for reflection

- 1 Consider your view of language learning in the light of the discussion and summary above. Which characteristics are regular parts of your teaching? In what ways are these characteristics evident?
- 2 Which characteristics are less evident in your teaching? In what ways might you incorporate these characteristics? How will this change your 'stance'?