Are you providing opportunities for your language learners to reflect?

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As you know, the two strands of Knowledge Awareness - language and culture - have equal weighting in the Learning Languages area of the NZ 2007 Curriculum. This was a paradigm shift in the teaching of additional languages, and to support teachers the Ministry of Education published a report (Newton, Yates, Shearn and Nowitski, 2010) that outlined 6 principles for intercultural communicative language teaching (iCLT). Intercultural language learners develop both the language and ability to engage with the foreign culture (Byram, Gribkova and Starkey, 2002) and interact across cultural boundaries. They are able to see the world through the eyes of others, and also, importantly, look at themselves from the outside (Sercu 2005).

Principle 3

We have been researching teacher understanding and implementation of these iCLT principles. In 2013 we emailed 800 school principals throughout the country seeking permission for us to invite language teachers of Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Samoan and Spanish students in Years 7-13 to take part in our study. We received permission from 43 principals, sent out 172 surveys and had a very good response rate (43%).

One of the interesting findings from surveys and interviews has been related to Principle 3 which states that iCLT 'encourages and develops an exploratory and reflective approach to culture and culture-in-language' (Newton et al, 2010, p.63).

Reflection

The reflection process provides an opportunity for students to decentre and start to examine not only the perspectives of others but also, importantly, how others might see them. As Byram, Gribkova and Starkey say, learners need to 'make the strange familiar' – see beyond the 'that's weird' moment and come to an understanding that behaviours, values and beliefs are in fact the norm for the 'other.' And significantly, learners also need to 'make the familiar strange' – see how their own world might be perceived through the eyes of others (2002, p.23)

Findings

From the responses to one of our survey questions about reflection, we found that most teachers (57 of the 65) said they were asking their learners to reflect on both their own lives and the lives of people in the target culture. When we explored this finding further through interviews with 12 case study teachers, we gained a rather different picture. We asked teachers for examples of how they were encouraging their students to reflect. The results were interesting. In response to the question, most of the teachers talked about comparisons, for example,

'... showing them something, perhaps a video clip... and asking them well what would we do, how is that different to what we would do, what do you find unusual about this? And the kids are quite quick to pick up on things that stand out to them' (Teacher of Chinese).

Or

[the learners were] 'really interested in the uniforms... and the use of computers... and the fact that in the school there was a lot of concrete....and how in NZ it was grass and playgrounds and things like that' (Teacher of Spanish).

However, Scarino and Liddicoat (2013) state that comparison in itself should not be 'the end point' but rather a resource and diving off point into greater complexity of thinking, i.e into *reflecting*. Comparing and reflecting are both part of their model of 4 inter-related processes for developing the intercultural language learner noticing, comparing, reflecting and interacting (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Students need to *notice* new aspects of language and culture that can then provide an opportunity for *comparing* the target language and culture with their own. In turn, comparisons can lead into *reflecting*, and bring new understandings to *interacting*. Thus, reflecting is an integral part of the cycle.

Example of reflection

Three of the teachers in our study gave examples of how they began to get their learners to reflect and to see their own world from the outside. One intermediate school teacher of French asked her learners to keep a food diary for a week, and then compare the diaries with menus from a French school canteen. She noted the learners could see

> "... there's huge differences between what the French eat and what we eat and how they go about eating that. We have 10 minutes lunch eating time and then [kids] have the rest of the hour to be outside and run around and do sport. So the actual lunch part, the food part is you know we eat quickly and we get on and do something else. The French people are going to have an hour for lunch and they're going to eat what the government regulations say you are going to eat."

The teacher reported that the time and regulated meals were 'a real eye opener for the kids.' She then went on to incorporate these ideas about lunchtimes and food into the fact NZ has a higher level of obesity than France, and asked the class to consider why. When looking at themselves and reflecting on their eating habits, the learners responded with 'Oh, we've got to bring better food in our lunches'. So the learners were not only able to see the world through the eyes of others – that there are different practices around school lunches in France; importantly, they also had the opportunity to look at themselves from the outside and gain deeper insights about their own practices.

Suggestions for developing learner reflective skills

The literature offers a number of key elements of reflection. Implementing these elements can help teachers to set up reflective learning in their language classrooms.

Puzzle -Trigger

First of all, students need to have relevant input that provides a catalyst for reflection. They need to see something – a puzzle, a problem, something troubling or surprising, something out of the ordinary. Liddicoat and Scarino call it 'dissonance' (2013, p.58); Poole, Jones and Whitfield call it

something 'contradictory to expectations' that can engage learners and be a prompt for reflection (2013, p.818).

The process of comparison can often provide the puzzle – a moment where learners stop and think: 'That's weird! That's interesting...... I wonder why....?' Moments such as these can provide the trigger that starts the process of deeper thinking. Teachers need to capture this moment to move learners from comparison into reflection.

Poole et al. (2013) note that people don't necessarily reflect on all experiences. The learner will choose whether something is worth the effort of reflection. Different students have different triggers or things they find puzzling.

Time

Secondly, learners need time and opportunities to reflect (Moon, 1999, p. 166). In the classroom, the teacher needs to value silence and allow wait time for learners to consider and process their ideas before they are expected to respond.

As well, there need to be multiple opportunities over a long time period to develop the habit of reflection. The reflection doesn't necessarily happen instantaneously – learners can keep coming back to reflecting on something puzzling over weeks at a time to make sense of their experience.

Dialogue

Thirdly, dialogue is recognised as an integral part of the skill of reflection. Dialogue helps learners to explore more fully their responses and reactions to situations which have piqued their interest. Learner dialogue can take the form of internal dialogue with themselves, or it can be interactive dialogue with classmates or the teacher.

Initially when students engage in dialogue, they often describe something. But it's important that the conversation doesn't end with a superficial description. As Poole et al suggest (2013) students need to know the difference between describing and reflecting. It's not enough just to tell students to 'go deeper'– they need to know what 'deeper' means. To go deeper, questioning has a strong role to play here.

Questioning

Kohonen (2003) recommends starting a language learning programme with initial concrete questions to scaffold learners into a reflective frame of mind. Eg. *Why do you want to learn this language? What do you find easy/difficult and why? What skills does language learning include?* Very basic, concrete questions such as these may start to establish the habit of reflection.

In addition, different types of questions can also prompt learner reflection. Moon and Saxon (cited in Moon, 1999) suggest using question types that go from lower order thinking where there are factual answers, to higher order thinking where there are no clear cut answers.

In the French school lunch context, lower order questions could include: *Where do French school students usually eat their lunch? Generally, how long are school lunchtimes in France?* Then teachers can pose higher order questions to lead learners to hypothesise and into abstract thinking and

reflection. Eg *I wonder why French students have long lunches*? Questions can focus learners on personalising, Eg. *What did you think when you first saw the formal lunch menu?* Questions can also help learners focus on future action, or projection, eg. *What would you think if you had a long lunch everyday in a French school canteen? If a student from France came to NZ what might they think about your lunch times?*

Conclusion

Providing a puzzle, time, interactive dialogue and carefully constructed questions are all key features of developing reflection. We believe teachers already have these skills as a resource and hope that this article may raise awareness again of the importance of them in intercultural language learning classroom. This will enable learners to not only gain an understanding of the new culture, but also gain greater insights into their own values, beliefs and practices.

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