



## Intercultural language teaching as a catalyst for teacher inquiry

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- A study of teachers developing intercultural competency through language teaching.
- Cycles of inquiry supported teachers' development of intercultural teaching.
- Short-term supported teacher inquiries are effective for teachers' learning.
- The inquiries resulted in significant shifts in teachers' practices.
- Language teacher education should include an intercultural focus.

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated how two teachers of languages, facilitated by university researchers, developed their practices with regard to intercultural language teaching. Taking a qualitative case study approach, we collected data from classroom observations, interviews, debriefing conversations, and guided reflective pieces written by the teachers. Findings indicate that the opportunities for teachers to inquire into their own practices shifted these teachers' approaches to language teaching to accommodate a curriculum expectation to develop students' intercultural communicative competence in plurilingual contexts. The study offers valuable insights for teacher education into the ways teachers' inquiries can support teachers' responses to curricular change.

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### 1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, foreign language teaching has expanded its goals from a mainly linguistic focus (knowing how to communicate in the target language fluently and accurately) towards a fuller attainment of communicative competence which is inherently intercultural (understanding that cultural assumptions, beliefs and practices, which may often be implicit, underpin successful communication). An intercultural approach to language teaching, which helps language learners to develop skills they need to interact successfully with others across cultural differences, has gained relevance in plurilingual contexts because of its potential to contribute to overarching educational objectives (Chan, Bhatt, & Nagami, 2015; Hill, 2012) and prepare learners for global

citizenship (Byram, 1992; Noddings, 2005; OECD, 2016). In fact, intercultural understanding and the development of intercultural capabilities have been recently incorporated into national curricula and other documents that inform teaching and learning, including in New Zealand, the context of the study presented here (Ministry of Education, 2007; 2014). Consequently, teachers in many countries across a range of curriculum areas and sectors are now expected to foster learners' intercultural competence through their teaching. However, as often happens, many teachers have been tasked with bringing about teaching innovations in response to curricular changes without adequate support (Fullan, 1993). This paper therefore responds to calls for more research into professional learning that addresses language teachers' understandings of how to develop intercultural communicative competence in their teaching and their students' learning (Deardorff, 2011; Diaz, 2012; Kramsch, 2014).

The exploratory study presented here aimed to investigate the processes of development of intercultural teaching of two teachers of languages through investigations into their practices facilitated

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by university researchers. Drawing on the framework of 'teaching as inquiry' as used in the New Zealand education context (Ministry of Education, 2007), the study contributes to the existing knowledge about teachers' professional learning and development in two significant ways. Firstly, it provides insights into how teacher development of intercultural teaching and learning shapes and is shaped by teachers' understandings of intercultural competence, particularly how teaching with an intercultural focus can change and enhance the teachers' language teaching practices. Secondly, by using teachers' inquiries as forms of teacher learning, the study pays specific attention to the processes by which the two teachers developed their understanding of intercultural language teaching and the contextual influences that played a significant role in those processes. Such information can provide useful directions in terms of what support is needed to facilitate language teachers' development of effective language programmes in order to incorporate an intercultural focus within their own language classrooms. As advocated by Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), studies such as this are required to explore teachers' active enactment of their intercultural understandings through an examination of their own teaching practices.

### 1.1. *Language teachers and the development of intercultural communicative competence*

Although an intercultural view of language teaching, that is, a view of language teaching that incorporates an intercultural dimension, can be traced back to the 1990s (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993), it has only been in the last decade that communicative language teaching has been reframed as intercultural (Sercu, 2007) in national curricula around the world. For example, major language curricular reforms were introduced in 2007 in both England and New Zealand (also see international survey in Lavrenteva & Orland-Barak, 2015). The move to language learning as a social practice of meaning-making and interpretation is a much more expanded view than having a pure language focus, and is claimed to provide a more engaging educational experience for students (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009). However, intercultural capability goes beyond a simple link between language and culture or learning facts about the target culture. It requires learners' reflections on those facts, comparisons and contrasts across cultures, and ultimately coming to a position whereby cultural differences can be navigated successfully and comfortably in encounters with those who are different or 'other' (East, 2008). This complex interplay between language learning and learners' development of cultural competencies to navigate an increasingly multilingual and interconnected world, i.e., developing intercultural communicative competence, has become the main focus of school language curricula and language pedagogy initiatives around the world (Council of Europe, 2001; Crozet, Liddicoat, & Lo Bianco, 1999; DCSF, 2009). However, especially in contexts where teachers are used to teaching an additional language from a purely linguistic (meaning and grammar) standpoint, often paying attention to culture as an addendum ('on Friday we will learn about the Eiffel Tower') there have been criticisms about the lack of pedagogical guidelines to support teachers' interpretation of the redefined curriculum goals (Conway, Richards, Harvey, & Roskvist, 2010; Oranje & Smith, 2017; Peiser & Jones, 2014).

The development of students' intercultural communicative competence has posed a challenge for many teachers of languages who must assume this responsibility without adequate supporting mechanisms. If teachers are seen as key brokers between theoretical understandings of interculturality and their application within language classrooms (Young & Sachdev, 2011), they have to be equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes

required to accomplish this wider task appropriately (Sercu, 2006). Developing intercultural stances is a process that is both cognitive and affective and it impacts teachers' personal theories of teaching as well as their professional identities (Byram, 2015). A key conceptual barrier is that interculturality is theoretically abstract and usually "presented in universalist terms, i.e. independent of context and age of the learners" (Hu & Byram, 2009, p. xii). Peiser (2015) asserts that the re-conceptualisation of language teaching as encompassing both linguistic and intercultural elements has not been easy to realise in practice. What is more, teachers themselves may not have confronted their own conceptualisations and understandings of interculturality and often do not fully understand their role in the development of intercultural stances in their students (Moloney, 2008).

Even when teachers acknowledge their key role in enabling the development of intercultural learning in their classrooms, they might still need to reconsider their own approaches to teaching languages. This necessitates an assessment of the depth of their own cultural knowledge (Sercu, 2005), and the possibility that they will need to develop strategies to promote instructional opportunities for intercultural language learning (Kohler, 2015). However, a number of empirical studies illustrate how teachers, in the absence of guidance on understanding or applying curricular reforms, interpret the curriculum in terms that are "highly idiosyncratic and intuitive" (Peiser & Jones, 2014, p. 387). As noted above, it has been observed, for example, that even when teachers demonstrate conceptual understanding of interculturality, they adopt a static (facts-based) approach to teaching culture, treating culture as a separate entity to language (Woodgate-Jones & Grenfell, 2012). Similarly, a longitudinal study of 40 primary schools in England indicates that teachers consider the cultural dimension important, yet culture was rarely planned to be included systematically in foreign language lessons (Driscoll, Earl, & Cable, 2013). Along the same lines, Woodgate-Jones and Grenfell (2012) found that interculturality remained peripheral to the main activities in language teaching.

In an interview study involving 19 primary teachers of English as a Foreign Language in Germany, Brunsmeyer (2016) concluded that, although the teachers in her study considered interculturality an important goal of foreign language learning, it was not consistently put into practice, mainly due to the fact that intercultural learning aims were not the foci of the teachers' lessons. Drawing on data from a large international sample, Sercu (2007) found that teachers were willing to teach intercultural competence, but this willingness was influenced by their different beliefs about the best way to teach it. Concurring with conclusions drawn by Diaz (2013) in the Australian context, teachers in Sercu's study referred to the overloaded language curriculum, in particular the strong focus on linguistic knowledge, as a barrier to implementing intercultural language teaching, and, significantly, also to their own unpreparedness to teach culture.

Besides the pedagogical limitations observed in the previous studies, several investigations have also found a number of contextual factors that influence how teachers approach culture in their language classrooms. Sercu's (2007) questionnaire study involving 424 teachers across seven countries identified both macro and micro contextual factors almost identical to those found by Diaz (2013) in the Australian context, namely, lack of time, curricular restrictions (e.g., too much emphasis on the linguistic aspects of language teaching), and lack of suitable teaching materials. The teachers in Diaz's study also mentioned difficulties in assessing students' interculturality and the unsustainability of such an approach. Diaz concluded that the development of an intercultural approach to language teaching remains at a rudimentary level, in particular because of the mismatch between advances at

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