Intercultural Awareness and Good Language Teachers

by Jonathan Newton, Fenty Siregar, Thi Phuong Thao Tran

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Introduction

Some years ago when I (first author) was teaching in an English for academic purposes program, I remember walking into my classroom on the first day of term to be faced with a stern-looking elderly Islamic cleric from Iran in flowing robes and turban and, next to him in the front row, a younger Japanese female student in something approaching a miniskirt. The other students in the room are a blur in my memory. Of course, the cultural mix in most language classrooms will not be so visually dramatic. Nevertheless, if you have taught a language in what are traditionally known as "second" language contexts (e.g., in a country such as New Zealand), you will most likely have taught culturally heterogeneous classes.

But cultural diversity is more often present than we might assume in ostensibly more homogenous "foreign" language learning contexts such as China where the target language is not widely spoken outside the classroom. In such contexts, the shared national identity of learners can sometimes hide underlying cultural diversity. Take, for example, an English teacher in a public primary school in Malaysia. They might have a class of anywhere between twenty-five and forty pupils, invariably made up of a mix of Chinese, Indian Malaysian, and Malay. In such contexts, intercultural dynamics can be particularly fraught because of the cultural politics being played out in the wider society, especially with regard to the political and social status of ethnically and/or religiously distinguishable minority groups.

The point is that for many language teachers the need to be interculturally aware is staring them in the face when they look at their students. And this is not just about needing the intercultural skills to build a harmonious multicultural classroom learning environment, as important as this is. It is equally about teachers having the intercultural awareness and skills to be able to build

intercultural learning opportunities out of diversity in the classroom and, in so doing, to equip learners with intercultural competences that they can take with them into their lives beyond the classroom and into the future.

Of course, not all language classrooms are multicultural; there are plenty of educational contexts characterized not by cultural heterogeneity but by cultural homogeneity. But in such contexts, the language teacher has no less responsibility to foster intercultural awareness. In fact, the foreign language classroom is likely to offer the most valuable site for learners in these contexts to encounter, through another language, different ways of being in and understanding the world. Such encounters can take learners beyond their taken-for-granted, culturally constructed worlds and, when skillfully managed by interculturally competent language teachers, offer important steps toward intercultural competence.

To explore these ideas further, in this chapter we present case studies of two teachers (the second and third authors of this chapter, respectively) as they grapple with the challenge of teaching for intercultural awareness. The first is Fenty Siregar's account of how she developed an intercultural stance in her teaching in English language classes at an Indonesian university. We follow Fenty's case with a discussion of theoretical underpinnings and then introduce the second case, that of Thi Phuong Thao Tran whose research is situated in English Foreign Language (EFL) classes at a university in Vietnam. We conclude with a discussion of practical implications for the classroom.

Case Study 1: An Autoethnographic Account of Teaching Interculturally at an Indonesian University

My name is Fenty Siregar (the second author of this chapter). I am Indonesian of both Bataknese and Chinese lineage and teach English at a private university in West Java. I completed my PhD at a New Zealand university in 2016 on the topic of affordances for intercultural teaching and learning in tertiary EFL policy and practice in Indonesia. As part of my PhD studies, I conducted what is known as an autoethnographic study of my own teaching over a semester. This involved reflecting on the experience of adopting a deliberate and principled intercultural stance in my teaching as I taught a speaking course in the English program. This allowed me to experience first-hand the opportunities and challenges of teaching English interculturally in an Indonesian tertiary classroom. There were thirteen first-semester students in the class. Their proficiency ranged from A1 to B1 (beginner to intermediate) on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

My autoethnography followed the steps typical of an action research cycle (Burns, 2009), namely:

(1) Identify an issue (how to adopt an intercultural stance).
(2) Put an intervention into action (using dialogic inquiry, Wells, 1999) to encourage learners to "decenter" from fixed cultural assumptions.

(3) Reflect on what happened.
(4) Refine the issue and continue through the cycle.

I also drew on other data sources including audio-video recordings of the lessons, reflective journals written by students, and interviews with students during the semester. This short case study will focus on one small aspect of my data, and that is the topic of religion as it played out within this multi-religious class.

When preparing my lessons, I followed Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), who suggest moving beyond textbooks and selecting resources that expose learners to a broad range of cultural themes such as gender, social class, ethnicity, region, religion, and political affiliation. These topics are often taboo for textbook publishers, but in fact provide invaluable windows into the inherent variability of culture. Touching on these topics was an important step for me in fostering opportunities for developing intercultural awareness.

Let me give an example of how this happened in one lesson, which focused on paralinguistic features of communication and the diverse linguistic and cultural preferences these involve. A student insisted on the idea that the handshake is a global practice. "All people? Are you sure?," I responded. Another student said it would be awkward not to handshake, to which I replied: "Awkward, but does it mean it's wrong [not to]?" In saying this, I sought to balance openness to the students' voices while also gently challenging them to reflect on their assumptions (Skene, 2013). We then discussed Muslim handshaking preferences, including the discouragement for a woman to shake a man's hand. I invited students to reflect on how they would respond to a person's rejection of a handshake offer. I also reminded the students of their Muslim female student classmate who was willing to shake her male friends' hands during role play. This case revealed to the students that cultural norms are contestable: They can be challenged and flaunted by individuals. Overall, the lesson illustrated the point that generalizations and stereotypes fail to reflect the complex interplay of social and cultural factors that inform identity, beliefs, and action (Kramsch & Zhu, 2016), and that open dialogue can help us decenter from our taken-for-granted, culturally informed views of the world.

Religious issues also arose in interviews with students and in their journals. One of the Christian students wrote that she was not close to some of her siblings or her father because they had a different religion. In Indonesia, a couple who have a different religion cannot legally get married; therefore, many couples decide to "temporarily" convert for the sake of getting a legal marriage but then unofficially return to their preferred religion (Seo, 2013). Also, a Buddhist student shared that she was afraid of engaging with Western culture because of acceptance of cohabitation before marriage, which her

religion forbids. Such comments revealed religion to be a constant theme in the lives of these students and a lens through which they interpreted culture.

Intercultural language teaching is primarily about the nexus between culture and language (what Risager, 2007, refers to as *languaculture*). And yet because taboo topics such as religion and systems of morality are so intertwined with culture (explicitly so in the Indonesian context), my pursuit of an intercultural stance drew me inexorably toward such topics. It also provided me with a framework for approaching such topics safely. However, it forced me to confront my own religiously informed worldview and to acknowledge the difficult question of cultural relativism. While some intercultural scholars such as Bennett (1998) and Witte (2014) argue that an intercultural perspective calls for cultural relativity, others such as Bredella (2003) argue that cultural relativism allows no room for critical understanding and assessment.

For me and my class, becoming more interculturally aware involved us not just in looking *outward* at the cultural "other" to inform our understanding of culture in the world around us. More profoundly, it required a reflexive view – a looking *inward* – through which we gradually became more open and aware of our own culturally shaped positioning and biases and, consequently I trust, more responsive to difference and better able to navigate new intercultural horizons.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Fenty's case study provides a valuable real-world reference point for answering two key questions:

- What is intercultural awareness?
- Why should it be considered a core teacher competence?

In answer to the first question, intercultural awareness is one component in the more general construct of intercultural competence. Byram's influential model (1997) of intercultural competence identifies five *savoirs* (knowledge types):

- Attitudes (relativizing self and valuing other – *savoir être*).
- Knowledge of self and others, and of interaction (*savoir*).
- Skills for interpreting and realigning (*savoir comprendre*).
- Skills for discovering and interacting (*savoir apprendre/faire*).
- Critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*).

Awareness is a central component of this model, a point Byram (2012) makes forcefully, arguing that:

> adding critical awareness – both linguistic and cultural – ensures that attention is paid to learners' education [. . .]. Without this dimension, language teaching does not contribute to its full potential to education [. . .], and it is the notion of criticality which makes the difference. (p. 9)

The reader might reflect on how the various savoirs in Byram's model play out in the classroom vignette described above. For example, consider how the discussion of handshake preferences involved interpreting and discovering cultural practices and, in the process, drew on and expanded critical cultural awareness.

To focus more specifically on intercultural awareness, Baker (2011) provides a useful definition:

> Intercultural awareness is a conscious understanding of the role culturally based forms, practices, and frames of understanding can have in intercultural communication, and an ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context specific manner in real time communication. (p. 66)

Attributes that are widely associated with intercultural awareness include (Tomalin, 2008; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004):

- Nonjudgmental attitudes – respect for difference.
- Curiosity about cultures.
- Tolerance of ambiguity when answers are not clear.
- Flexibility and openness to different solutions to problems.
- The ability to put yourself in the other's shoes.

Fenty's story again provides examples of how these attributes can be incorporated into teaching practice.

We turn now to the second question: Why should intercultural awareness be viewed as a core language teacher competence? In what follows, we outline four reasons. Each of these resonates with aspects of Fenty's narrative and anticipates themes that we explore later in the chapter when we discuss research that Thi Phuong Thao Tran (the third author) carried out in a Vietnamese university.

Reason 1. *Culture and language are intertwined.* Language constructs and sustains culture just as culture shapes the language choices available to us and the impact of the language choices we make on others. As Kramsch (1993) argues, every time we speak, we perform a cultural act. This leads us to a basic and often-overlooked truth about language teaching: *The language teacher is a teacher of culture* whether they know it or whether they like it. An intercultural stance provides teachers with a principled basis for doing justice to this fact.

Reason 2. *Diversity in the classroom.* The global movement of people has made diversity an increasingly common feature of classrooms. More than ever this requires that teachers possess the skills to create harmonious classrooms. As research by Senior (2002) shows, when student diversity is accepted and valued, it promotes the development of a spirit of community within the class group. At a minimum, this requires teachers to:

- Model intercultural sensitivities in the way they interact with diversity in the classroom.

- Adopt a pedagogy that values difference and provides guided opportunities for students to navigate "otherness."

Good language teachers are normally able to use diversity to build class cohesion (Senior, 2001).

Reason 3. *Diversity beyond the classroom.* As a consequence of global mobility becoming a common feature of higher education and work life, diversity in our classrooms reflects the more general experience of cultural diversity in our communities and in the future lives of our learners. It is widely acknowledged that education, and especially language education, must respond to these social forces by preparing students for the experience of being global citizens. An obvious example is the foregrounding of intercultural competence in the CEFR, a framework that, in recent years, has increasingly influenced national language education policies and curricula beyond the European context. The logical corollary is the expectation that language education (and schools, education systems, etc.) will help prepare learners to thrive in changing cultural contexts.

Canagarajah (2005) lists five shifts in pedagogy required to address the dynamic interchange between global processes and local conditions:

1. Rather than teach one language, develop competence in a repertoire of codes.
2. Approach texts and languages as hybrid and changing.
3. Move the goal from competence to join a single community to acquiring the ability to move between communities.
4. Competencies should not focus on rules and conventions but on strategies for negotiating meanings in a range of communicative situations.
5. Adopt translanguaging practices in which L1 is a resource harnessed for learning a new language.

This list reflects growing awareness that traditional views of proficiency in English as benchmarked against the formal linguistic properties of native speaker varieties of English are no longer viable (if they ever were) in a world in which English is increasingly used as an international language between speakers of different languages and in which intercultural communication is increasingly multilingual as interlocutors share knowledge of more than one language. In this vein, Sussex and Kirkpatrick (2012, pp. 226–228) propose that competence in English as an international language be characterized by seven sociopragmatic and intercultural competences listed below. These map in interesting ways onto Canagarajah's list.

1. Tolerance and participation in variation.
2. Switching.
3. Repair and recovery.
4. Negotiation.
5. Accommodation.
6. Emotional intelligence (i.e., self-awareness and empathy).
7. Intercultural communicative competence.

On a related note, the experience of cultural diversity is paralleled by an unprecedented increase in exposure to diverse cultural expression in popular

media. Thus, even in language classrooms in homogenous cultural contexts, learners, through their participation in digitally mediated worlds, are likely to encounter unfamiliar cultural content and contexts. Here, too, teachers have cause to adopt an intercultural stance in their teaching to equip learners to respond critically and reflectively to the cultural influences to which they are exposed.

Reason 4. *Gaps in cultural representations in textbooks.* The design of textbooks is often driven by economic imperatives and by perceptions of what the market wants. A satisfactory representation of culture and principled intercultural learning opportunities are too often casualties of such publishers' imperatives (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Risager, 2018). But even with the best will in the world, it may not be feasible to do justice to intercultural learning in a textbook, especially in textbooks designed for international markets. This is because a fundamental principle of intercultural awareness is to focus not on general, essentialized expressions of culture but on experiential engagement with lived culture. This requires teachers to make cultural links of relevance to particular learners in particular learning settings.

These four arguments for treating intercultural awareness as a core teacher competence are by no means an exhaustive list. They do, however, highlight important reasons for teachers to model intercultural values and to develop the capacity and skills to teach from an intercultural stance. We now turn to the second research study undertaken by the third author of this chapter that focuses on helping teachers to develop an intercultural stance on their teaching.

Case Study 2: Assisting Vietnamese Tertiary Foreign Language Teachers to Teach Interculturally

In my research, I (Thao, third author) investigated the potential for enriching intercultural content in foreign language instruction at a Vietnamese university. This involved four steps:

- Observing the normal class practices of three case study teachers.
- Tracking their involvement in professional learning workshops focused on developing intercultural teaching.
- Observing transfer of learning to their classroom teaching.
- Obtaining their final reflections on interculturally informed teaching.

Because of space limitations, we will focus only on one teacher, Ms. Sen.

Ms. Sen is an English lecturer at a university in Vietnam with 39 years of teaching experience and a master's degree in TESOL from the United States (2001). Her class had around twenty students ages 18–20 who were training to be interpreters/translators. The English level of the students was CEFR A2-B1 (elementary to pre-intermediate). They were a culturally homogenous group

from the local provinces; few had had contact with foreign speakers and cultures.

My observation of three of Ms. Sen's classes prior to the workshop showed that she closely followed the textbook. In only one of the three lessons did Ms. Sen address cultural topics. Here, she explicitly taught about cultural facts such as school time in Vietnam and Japan, and how and when to ask someone to repeat what they said in conversation. Her teaching in this lesson offered the following affordances for developing the students' intercultural awareness:

- She taught culture through teaching language (e.g., comparing vocabulary in American and British English, talking about culture in the target language).
- She focused on culture as lived experience (e.g., the time children start school in Vietnam compared to Japan).
- She encouraged intercultural thinking skills such as comparing and relating (e.g., whether taking an afternoon nap was a shared cultural norm).
- She drew on her real-life experience of living in the United States during her master's study.
- The comparisons she made were multicultural rather than just focused on the culture of native English speakers.

However, from an intercultural perspective, three possible limitations were noted:

- Two of the three observed lessons contained no reference to culture or cultural dimensions of communication in English.
- Ms. Sen's main emphasis was on nativelike standards of linguistic accuracy.
- She tended to teach *about* culture (i.e., culture facts) rather than allow the students to explore and construct intercultural understandings.

In post-observation interviews, Ms. Sen's comments showed that she valued culture in language teaching and sought opportunities to make cultural comparisons. One quote (translated from Vietnamese) illustrates this point:

> *I also included cultural contents for students to understand further about the culture of their own and of the target language they are studying. Through that integrated teaching, students can get benefits regarding better understandings about the world, a new and open outlook that is not restricted to thinking only of their own culture. This teaching motivates students more and makes them think more for others and not consider themselves the number one. Thus, I also mention cultural aspects.*

Overall, the data showed that Ms. Sen's approach to culture teaching was positively aligned with an intercultural stance and suggested that she would respond positively to professional development in this area.

After these classes were observed, Ms. Sen and two other teachers took part in two workshops focused on developing intercultural teaching awareness and skills. Materials for the workshops included lessons from their

textbook that were redesigned to reflect the following core principles of intercultural teaching and learning:

1. Mine the input for its cultural content.
2. Encourage an exploratory, experiential, comparative, and reflective approach to culture in which the learners (guided by the teacher) construct intercultural perspectives.
3. Develop awareness of how one's own assumptions, beliefs, and behavior are culturally shaped.
4. Value intercultural learning goals alongside linguistic and communicative goals.

In the redesigned lessons, the students were first given a scenario and asked to make hypotheses about how the communication should be managed (e.g., how to ask a teacher to write you a letter of recommendation). The learners also created role-plays of this same communicative scenario in Vietnamese for a point of comparison. They then listened to and analyzed the textbook input, reflected on aspects of it, and revisited their hypotheses in light of this input. Finally, they had opportunities to relate their learning in the lesson to previous beliefs and experiences and to critically reflect on this.

After Ms. Sen had attended the first workshop and taught three classes using this new intercultural approach, she was interviewed. She expressed enthusiasm about the experience of adopting a more intercultural stance in her teaching as the following four comments (spoken in English) illustrate:

Relating and reflecting is the part I like most, and the second is the comparison. When students compare conversation in textbook with the conversation they wrote.

They analyzed conversations, they get involved, they relate, . . . they revise, they get involved. . . . All steps they have to get involved.

In order to teach intercultural communication, a teacher needs to know their own culture.

[In the future] I will analyze the lesson plans more in detail . . ., and reflecting, relating because that means you bring real life in your teaching. That is the part I am very pleased with. I think the reasons why students cannot speak fluently in real situation because they only learned from book, they don't bring real life in class.

Two overall findings from this study deserve a few comments. First, the study provided evidence of successful professional learning focused on developing teachers' intercultural teaching skills in a foreign language context. We believe that the following factors contributed to the success of this professional learning:

- It was situated in the teachers' context.
- It was based on existing materials rather than replacing them.
- It modeled intercultural teaching quite specifically in the form of redesigned textbook units.
- It provided a practical focus on actual lessons and allowed teachers to explore their understandings of these lessons in collaborative dialogue.

Second, drawing on Ms. Sen's account, it was clear that her ability to foster intercultural awareness in her lessons improved as a result of participating in the workshops. Furthermore, according to her, the actual teaching and learning that went on in the three intercultural lessons were positive experiences for both teacher and learners. Of note was the realization by all the teachers that they could effectively achieve linguistic and intercultural learning goals synergistically, without compromising either.

Discussion and Practical Implications

The two studies presented in this chapter point to a number of answers to the question of what teachers can do to promote intercultural awareness.

First, the teacher with intercultural awareness can foster in learners a reflective stance on their own cultural assumptions. As Avruch and Black (2014) argue, "One's own culture provides the lens through which we view the world; the 'logic' . . . by which we order it; the 'grammar' . . . by which it makes sense" (p. 133). For example, learners may be given opportunities to reflect on and try out the target communicative event (e.g., introducing a friend to one's parents) in their first language/culture before trying it out in a different cultural context. This gives learners (and the teacher) the chance to explore their own culturally informed realities, compare them with each other, and then compare them with the lives of cultural "others." It is important to note that, in making comparisons, we should avoid getting hung up on cultural differences, because in so doing we overlook the important core of common culture we all share. As Holliday (2013) points out, culture consists of massive underlying universal cultural processes, including those we all draw on to read and negotiate culture.

Second, the intercultural teacher can model appreciation of cultural diversity in the student population. Valuing diversity means not just affirming individual expressions of identity but also using diversity in the classroom and community for pedagogic purposes, that is, as a basis for experiential and exploratory intercultural learning. The lesson described in Fenty's case study above provides a good example of this.

Third, the intercultural teacher can seek ways to challenge stereotyping by focusing on everyday lived culture. This involves a focus on the lived experience of individuals and so finds expression in stories, literature, and in students making contact with individuals outside their usual cultural milieu. It also involves a focus on ways of communicating (e.g., greetings, kinship terms, forms of address, how colors are interpreted) that quickly reveal cultural dimensions of language in use. In both cases, a process of experiential, exploratory learning is required in contrast to more traditional approaches in

which the teacher transmits cultural facts – the 4-F Approach: folk dances, festivals, fairs, and food.

Fourth, the intercultural teacher emphasizes processes of discovery and questioning, notably through what is known as dialogic inquiry (Wells, 1999) or dialogic teaching (Reznitskaya, 2012). Dialogic teaching involves the teacher and students acting as coinquirers, collaboratively evaluating and interpreting the topics and texts a lesson is focused on. Earlier in the chapter we provided an example of such an approach in Fenty's vignette concerning handshaking preferences. Dialogic teaching has been extensively researched and promoted in elementary and secondary school education, and perhaps deserves more attention in language classrooms, especially for the purpose of modeling and developing intercultural awareness. The following six characteristics of dialogic teaching adapted from Reznitskaya (2012) provide a useful starting point for understanding this approach:

1. Power relations are flexible with students given responsibility to maintain discussion.
2. Questioning is open and divergent.
3. Feedback is meaningful and specific.
4. Meta-level reflection through which students "pay attention to the process and quality of their reasoning" is frequent.
5. "Why" and "how" questions encourage students to present lengthy, elaborate explanations.
6. Knowledge is co-constructed through collaborative listening and sharing.

Although space constraints prevent us from discussing the many other implications that we could draw from the two accounts of intercultural teaching we have described in this chapter, we encourage the reader to draw further insights from these two cases.

Directions for Future Research

Despite a large body of scholarship on the subject of intercultural awareness, actual empirical studies of intercultural teaching and its impact on learning are relatively sparse. There is scope for many more qualitative studies such as those presented in this chapter that investigate the experience of teachers in a diverse range of settings as they seek to adopt more interculturally oriented teaching practices. In this chapter we have illustrated the value of using case study and autoethnography for this purpose. Both are examples of narrative enquiry (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014), an approach that treats the stories of teachers (and learners) as valid and valuable forms of classroom research. An advantage of such approaches is that they reduce the gap between teaching and research and between teachers and researchers.

Conclusion

The two studies presented in this chapter suggest that good language teachers need to become coexplorers of culture with their learners, focusing on lived culture and on experiences of cultural variety close at hand. This frees them from the expectation of being the culture expert, an expectation that is especially unrealistic for teachers who may have never visited or lived in countries in which the target language is widely spoken (Ghanem, 2015). In the face of such an expectation, it is not surprising that many teachers respond by treating culture superficially and factually, or avoiding it altogether in their teaching, focusing instead on language stripped of its cultural content.

It is important for all teachers to appreciate that their expertise lies not so much in what they know about the culture but in the opportunities that they create for learners to learn about the language and culture themselves. The two case studies presented here show that for the good language teacher, intercultural awareness is a key starting point for effective intercultural teaching. Furthermore, the studies illustrate how intercultural awareness informs both how teaching is conducted and what learning outcomes are valued.

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