

# **Developing Critical Languaculture Pedagogies in Higher Education**

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# **Developing Critical Languaculture Pedagogies in Higher Education**

Theory and Practice

**Adriana Raquel Díaz**

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# Contents

Figures and Tables	vii
Foreword	ix
Preface	xiii
Introduction	xv

## **Part 1: The Theory/Practice Gap in Language and Culture Pedagogies in Higher Education**

1	Stumbling Blocks to Bridging the Theory/Practice Gap	3
	Introduction	3
	Language and Culture Pedagogy: Facing Some Inconvenient Truths	4
	Languages in the Higher Education Context: The State of Play in the International Scene	12
	Conclusion	23
2	From Stumbling Blocks into Building Blocks	25
	Building Blocks for Sustainable Pedagogical Innovation	25
	Conceptualising a Framework for Sustainable Pedagogical Innovation	26
	Conclusion	58

## **Part 2: Theory Versus Practice and the Realm of Possibility**

3	Case Studies of Curricular Innovation	63
	Introduction – Moving From Theory to <i>Praxis</i> Through Everyday Classroom Activities	63
	The Italian Language Programme	70
	The Chinese Language Programme	93
	Conclusion	111

4	The Good, The Bad and The Feasible	112
	Extrapolating Exemplars of Good Practice	112
	Acknowledging Recurrent Limitations in the Framework's	
	Building Blocks	121
	Revisiting the Framework's Foundations	128
	Conclusion	136

### **Part 3: Bridging the Gap Without Falling into the Precipice**

5	Articulating the Feasible with Sustainable Innovation	141
	Revisiting the Teacher's Role as Curriculum Innovator	142
	Scaffolding Innovation Through Professional Development	147
	Ensuring Sustainability Through Active Embedding	
	of Innovation	152
	Articulating Innovation and Sustainability with Current	
	Demands in Higher Education	154
	Conclusion	156
	Conclusion: Prospects for a Field in Transition	158
	Aims Revisited	159
	Implications for Language and Culture Pedagogy	160
	Implications for the HE Sector	165
	Concluding Remarks	167
	Appendix 1: Case Study A: <i>Linguaculture</i> Workshop Presentation	
	in Italian Culture Context Subject	169
	Appendix 2: Case Study B: Italian Language Subject Sample	
	Lesson Plan	171
	Appendix 3: Case Study B: <i>Linguaculture</i> Workshop Presentation	
	in Italian Language subject	173
	Appendix 4: Case Study C: Chinese Language Subject	174
	Appendix 5: Case Study D: Discovery Page	175
	References	177
	Index	194

# Figures and Tables

## Figures

<b>Figure 2.1</b>	Graphic interpretation of Crozet's conceptual framework	32
<b>Figure 2.2</b>	Mezirow's levels of reflectivity	41
<b>Figure 2.3</b>	Progression in development of intercultural practices	50
<b>Figure 2.4</b>	Cyclical model of the acquisition of sociocultural knowledge	51
<b>Figure 3.1</b>	Flowchart of multiple case study development	67
<b>Figure 3.2</b>	Discussion forum excerpt	79
<b>Figure 3.3</b>	Chinese insider/outsider <i>languaculture</i> concept map	108

## Tables

<b>Table 2.1</b>	Taxonomy of awareness levels and related skills	46
<b>Table 3.1</b>	Italian language programme structure	70
<b>Table 3.2</b>	Case Study A: <i>Languaculture</i> modules intervention schedule	74
<b>Table 3.3</b>	Case Study B: <i>Languaculture</i> modules intervention schedule	85
<b>Table 3.4</b>	Case Study B: Schedule of intercultural reflection questions in <i>schede</i>	87
<b>Table 3.5</b>	Chinese language programme structure	93
<b>Table 3.6</b>	Case Study C: <i>Languaculture</i> modules intervention schedule	98

<b>Table 3.7</b>	Case Study D: <i>Languaculture</i> modules intervention schedule	105
<b>Table 4.1</b>	Comparative summary of <i>languaculture</i> interventions	114
<b>Table 5.1</b>	The roles of the teacher	144



# Foreword

This book emerges at a time when language education is confronting a period of change and it seeks both to document and contribute to that change. New forms of communication, greater mobility and the emergence of language as a critical form of capital in the knowledge economy have all placed pressure of language educators and language programmes to develop learners with intercultural capabilities. This represents a challenge for language educators as they respond to new needs and new contexts in their practice.

The idea that language learning prepares students to understand and communicate with members of other cultures is hardly new. Language educators have long included the development of intercultural capabilities as a rationale for language teaching. However, although intercultural capabilities may have been an aim for language education, teaching approaches have not typically focused on these, seeing them rather as implicit in any form of successful language learning. The recognition that language education is to be successful in developing intercultural capabilities is much more recent and has led to a radical rethinking of the nature and processes of language teaching and learning. Central to this rethinking is the idea that intercultural capabilities need to be foregrounded in language teaching and learning at all points in language education programmes.

The reason for this rethinking has been a realisation that language learning without a specific intercultural focus has not developed the sorts of capabilities that language educators have claimed. Negative attitudes, problematic stereotypes and limited abilities to adapt to the languages, cultures and perspectives of others may persist throughout the learning of a language and, in some cases, may intensify through the processes of learning. This is because the development of intercultural capabilities is not inherent in the acquisition of communicative competence as represented by the grammar and vocabulary of a language. Rather it is something additional to these.

The realisation that language teaching needs to be adjusted to achieve what language educators have claimed as a goal of teaching and learning has led to rapid changes in the ways in which culture is integrated into language education. Although culture has long been present in language programmes, the cultural component of teaching has usually been separated from the language itself and has been seen as an additional dimension of learning, either communicated outside the target language or reserved for advanced level students whose language abilities were considered adequate for dealing with complex content. This separation of language and culture has effectively limited what can be achieved in language programmes in terms of intercultural learning. Recent thinking has called for a more integrated approach to language and culture in language education.

Revising language education programmes to integrate language and culture has not proved to be easy. This is because such integration does not simply involve a revision of language curricula but a complete reconceptualisation of the nature of language teaching and learning. This reconceptualisation involves new understandings of some of the fundamentals of language education, notably how we understand the core concepts of language, culture and learning.

The reconceptualisation of language has involved a shift from seeing language only in terms of code (grammar and vocabulary) to a view that integrates the code with social practices of meaning making and interpretation. Language is therefore not simply understood as the building blocks of communication, but as the processes and products of that communication. Understanding a language is therefore not simply a feature of proficiency, but a complex interpretative act that recognises language as constituting and constituted by the social actions of communicators. Learning a new language therefore involves more than the acquisition of new grammar and vocabulary as it requires the language learner to engage with the culturally positioned nature of language in use. In such a view of language the learners' first language and the target language do not operate independently – the practices and processes of meaning making and interpretation in each language are always potentially present in communication. A new language therefore needs to be understood in relation to the practices of meaning making and interpretation that are already available for the learner.

The impact of this reconceptualisation has been significant for understanding the nature of language, however, it can be argued that it more significantly for how language educators have come to understand the nature of culture. The typical way of dealing with culture in language programmes has been to focus on culture as artefacts and information developed by another culture, typically understood as a monolithic national culture. Culture has

been presented as uniform and immutable. Understanding a culture has meant knowing about cultural products of others. The shift to interculturally oriented language education has entailed a shift in views of culture from artefacts and information, to a view of culture as symbols and practices that are constituent elements of the social world. Learning in relation to such an understanding involves engagement with practices in processes of meaning making and interpretation. Concomitant with this shifting focus in the nature of culture has been a realisation that language learning needs to engage with culture as situated, variable, plural and contested – a dynamic creative processes of human social interaction rather than a static representation of undifferentiated national representation.

As languages do not exist in isolation from each other, so too are cultures brought into the relationship through language teaching and learning. The learners' own cultures are a powerful component of the ways that they make sense of their world and communications about it. These cultures cannot be excluded from the communicative practices of second language users, but need to be brought into relationship with them. The learning of culture cannot therefore be isolated from the symbolic and interactional practices that constitute the learners' existing cultural repertoires. For this reason, language education has come to emphasise processes of decentring – stepping outside existing cultural assumptions to view the world from different perspectives – and mediation – interpreting cultural realities across cultural boundaries.

Finally, the view of learning involved in language education has been enlarged. Since the 1980s, language education has favoured the idea of acquisition – the unconscious development of language through comprehensible input – over conscious learning. However, such a view of learning does not allow for the development of the more complex needed to develop intercultural capabilities. Interculturally oriented language education has, therefore, developed an expanded theory of learning that integrates acquisition and learning in mutually supporting ways. The focus on learning allows for a sophisticated involvement of language learners in reflection on processes of meaning making and interpretation.

The reconceptualisation of language learning found in interculturally oriented forms of language education has resulted from an ongoing consideration of theoretical concepts in language teaching and learning, but the development of practice has tended to lag behind theoretical development. The introduction of any new way of working in education requires dissemination among those whose experience, both as teachers and as learners, has been developed in different contexts. Developing practice, therefore involves working with practitioners to engage in change both in conceptualisation and practice.

In interculturally oriented language education, developing practice is complex because intercultural language teaching and learning does not provide a methodology for teaching that can be adopted into practice to transform education. The fact that intercultural language teaching and learning is not a methodology results from a view of practice that maintains that there is no ready-made, one-size-fits-all way of developing intercultural capabilities through language education. Rather teaching and learning processes need to be understood in context. Therefore it is more appropriate to consider intercultural language teaching and learning in terms of a perspective on, or stance towards, learning in which the conceptualisation of the nature and purpose of language education leads to practical responses. The emphasis on stance or perspective entails the development, by individual teachers, of a comprehensive approach driven by reflective practice informed by theory, which can be used to scaffold the systematic integration of a coherent language and culture pedagogy.

This book represents an early investigation of the complexities of developing practice in intercultural language teaching and learning. It presents a coherent framework for approach curriculum and pedagogy, and documents the experiences of a group of teachers in developing their practice in response to emerging ideas of interculturally oriented language teaching and learning. In so doing, it addresses the pervasive theory/practice gap in language education by providing a comprehensive conceptual discussion of emerging critical themes in intercultural language teaching and learning supported by empirical accounts and case studies from the classroom. By evaluating theoretical and practical issues, this book identifies viable, sustainable innovation strategies for systematically integrating critical pedagogies in university language programmes.

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# Preface

This book was born of a desire to articulate the perceived gap between theory and practice in language and culture pedagogy. This gap, which seems unbridgeable at times, surely needs to be narrowed if we are effectively to address what is widely acknowledged to be one of the key competences for the 21st century: the development of intercultural competence. This has been the subject of countless scholarly publications, from monographs to journal articles, textbooks and conference proceedings. Many of these have become seminal works that serve as the foundations for this book. And yet, this subject continues to mystify theorists (i.e. linguists and applied linguists) and practitioners (i.e. teachers, teacher trainers and curriculum designers) alike. The volume of work available is all but testament to this.

In my own case, this gap continues to manifest itself as a chasm in personal and professional interactions. Earlier it was through my experiences as a learner of the English language in Argentina and subsequently, for over a decade now, as a foreign language teacher living in Australia. At the core of my concerns and frustrations has always been a fascination with language and culture, how they co-relate and how this relationship manifests in interaction.

This book has been, therefore, a way for me to pursue my own quest to help bridge the theory/practice gap in language and culture pedagogy. In so doing, I seek to help other language teachers and curriculum developers, like myself, to rethink their language and culture teaching practices and develop ways to articulate these into principles that may be adapted to the diverse and imperfect nature of the everyday language classroom. Principles that may also be relevant beyond the classroom, to best serve us in the increasingly globalised world in which we live. Indeed, because of the global shift in higher education and the consequences of this for pedagogy, these principles also need to be embedded in the international context that is currently shaping the higher education policy agenda, and, in turn, ineluctably shaping our practices.

I could not have completed this book without the support of a number of people and I extend my most sincere gratitude to all of them. This book draws from the empirical research I conducted as part of my doctoral dissertation, so I begin by acknowledging the guidance provided by my supervisors Dr Susana Eisenchlas and Dr Sue Trevaskes. I sincerely thank them both for being devoted mentors to me in my career as a beginning academic. I am also indebted to Ms Maureen Todhunter, who edited and proofread this manuscript diligently, and provided invaluable support in conceptualising this book as a coherent whole. I would also like to thank the editorial staff at Multilingual Matters, as well as the reviewers of the book proposal and final manuscript, their input and suggestions were invaluable to completing this work.

I thank all the participants in my empirical study for the time, ideas and support they provided in our meetings and interviews. I am particularly indebted to the teacher-participants, who by sharing insights into their experiences and teaching practices were instrumental in enabling me to bring this investigation to fruition.

Last but not least I acknowledge the valuable contributions of my loved ones. My parents, Sofia Luna de Díaz and Carlos Daniel Díaz, enabled me to make my dream of studying in Australia a reality and continue to encourage me in my academic endeavours. Above all, I thank my husband, Fabio Caruso, for always being there for me, for motivating me and inspiring me to never give up on my dreams.

# Introduction

In many ways it is a truism that the world is more globally interconnected than even before. The last few decades in particular have witnessed profound changes in population mobility, technology enabling instant international communication and the ever-increasing frequency of intercultural encounters. These changes impact significantly on the employment market, where many prospective employees are expected to have skills and knowledge to enable them to deal competently in a wide range of situations and with people who have diverse language and cultural experiences and communication styles. In this context, higher education has become central to developing these skills and to providing graduates with competitive advantage in the international labour marketplace (Paige & Goode, 2009). Yet despite this imperative and the opportunities it presents, as Lee *et al.* point out, institutions ‘are not doing an adequate job’ (Lee *et al.*, 2012: 1).

According to the latest Global Survey conducted by the International Association of Universities in 2010, the top rationale driving internationalisation processes in higher education institutions is ‘improving student preparedness for a globalised world’. The second is ‘internationalising the curriculum’ (Egron-Polak & Hudson, 2010). Many educators acknowledge that preparing students for this globalised world hinges largely on integrating students’ intercultural competence across disciplines, course curricula and degree structures (*cf.* Lee *et al.*, 2012). This approach extends to the study of languages (Dlaska, 2000, 2003), which is widely acknowledged as integral to raising awareness and understanding about underlying cultural values and beliefs reflected in communication (*cf.* Byram, 2009b; Della Chiesa *et al.*, 2012; Risager, 2006b; Sercu & Bandura, 2005; UNESCO, 2009).

However, strategies responding to internationalisation have largely overlooked the role of foreign language education<sup>1</sup> in preparing graduates for engaging in an intercultural dialogue with and in this globalised world (*cf.* Bergan & van’t Land, 2010; Byram, 2012b; Dlaska, 2012; Klee, 2009; Warner,