

# **Teachers as Mediators in the Foreign Language Classroom**

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AND EDUCATION: 27**

# **Teachers as Mediators in the Foreign Language Classroom**

**Michelle Kohler**

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# Introduction

For some decades there has been an increasing recognition and understanding of the place of culture in language education as a basis for more effective language learning and understanding of other world views. The global reality of superdiversity (Vertovec, 2010) and increasing multilingualism (Bloomaert *et al.*, 2012) has further focused attention on the importance of developing capabilities to engage with other languages and cultures in meaningful and mutually beneficial ways. The shift towards an intercultural orientation in language teaching and learning is viewed as a means of achieving these capabilities.

There is now a substantive body of work related to intercultural language teaching and learning which is largely theoretical in orientation, focusing on conceptual frameworks and considerations for practice. There is less work related to investigating practice and in particular how intercultural language teaching and learning occur in the foreign language classroom. There is little work in particular on mediation and the role of language teachers as mediators of intercultural language learning. This book focuses on precisely this area of practice. It examines in detail how teachers of languages mediate intercultural language learning with their students in the daily reality of school language programmes. It is an account of language teachers and their students who live the experience of intercultural language teaching and learning, and of the research process through which this account was reached. The main body of the book presents the findings of the research; however, the reader who is interested in the process will find in this introduction and in the detailed appendices an explanation of the ‘participant action research’ that was undertaken.

## Context of the Study

This book presents a multiple case study of three foreign language teachers in Australian schools who participated in an investigation that I conducted into how teachers of languages mediate intercultural language learning in their teaching practice. The study evolved in response to my own interest and awareness of both an increasing critique in the field of applied linguistics and language education of communicative language teaching, and a shift towards intercultural language teaching and learning. This shift

paralleled my own experience as a former secondary school language teacher with students who were not willing to undertake 'pseudo' communication tasks and who were demanding greater relevance, conceptually demanding and meaningful language learning experiences.

At the time, communicative language teaching heralded a new era of language teaching in which the social and purposeful nature of language was foregrounded. It did, however, become realised in ways that were not beneficial and one of the major criticisms has been that communicative language teaching has largely focused on an idealised monolingual, native speaker norm (Byrnes, 2006). It has assumed that both language learners and users have discrete languages and that the goal in teaching and learning is to acquire a further discrete language (the target language) in order to communicate fluently with native speakers of that language. Others' criticisms include that communication in this approach has become primarily 'transactional' in orientation, that it is biased towards listening and speaking, and often results in formulaic or rehearsed language that is detached from its real-world contexts and purposes of use (Eisenchlas, 2010; Legutke & Thomas, 1991; Leung, 2005; Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009).

The criticisms of communicative language teaching, together with emerging understandings of language and culture, have resulted in efforts over recent decades to generate new theoretical frames that recognise the significance of culture and context in language use (Byram, 1991; Damen, 1987; Kramsch, 1993, 1995). Sociocultural competence (Nostrand, 1991) and intercultural competence (Buttjes, 1991; Byram, 1988) were new models that attempted to do just that. Indeed, Byram and Alred (2002) suggested that the notion of an 'intercultural speaker' was a more appropriate goal for language teaching and learning, reflecting the difference between the processes of first language acquisition and one's primary socialisation, and that of additional language learning and tertiary socialisation. Others have proposed a goal that is oriented towards 'functional multilingualism' and the capability of language learners to navigate and move between multiple languages and cultures; being an intercultural meaning maker (Byrnes, 2006; Kramsch, 2006b; Risager, 2007).

Much of the initial work related to intercultural competence was theoretical in nature, attempting to conceptualise the area and identify considerations for research and practice (Buttjes, 1991; Byram, 1989, 1991; Byram *et al.*, 1994; Byram & Zarate, 1994; Crozet & Liddicoat, 2000; Damen, 1987; Kramsch, 1993, 1995, 1998, 2008; Lo Bianco, 2003; Paige *et al.*, 1999). Following this, work has become more practice oriented, addressing various dimensions. For example, studies have focused on evaluating textbooks in terms of their representations of language and culture in

materials for language teaching (Kramersch, 1987; Sercu, 2000). In the area of curriculum, Byram *et al.* (2001) investigated teachers' planning and programming practices using learning objectives in a number of different countries and contexts. Liddicoat *et al.* (2003) developed a set of principles and outlined their related implications for curriculum, assessment, teaching and learning. Sercu (2005) has investigated language teachers' perceptions of the 'cultural' dimension of their work, finding that while they were willing to support cultural objectives in language teaching, they remained committed to a communicative orientation in practice. Sercu (2006) also found that despite expectations that language teachers were incorporating an intercultural orientation in their teaching, a significant number of them reported difficulties and remain focused on traditional pedagogies. More recently, Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) exemplify aspects of intercultural language teaching with vignettes of teachers' practice drawn from a number of research studies and professional learning programmes. In the higher education context, Diaz (2013) reports on curriculum design and implementation in Italian and Chinese programmes, highlighting various 'stumbling blocks' to implementing an intercultural orientation in practice, and proposing a framework to address what she regards as a theory and practice divide.

Hence, there is a growing body of work focused on practice, particularly in the areas of curriculum, programming, resourcing and, to a lesser degree, assessment. There remains little investigation, however, of the nature of intercultural language teaching and learning itself, and specifically the act of mediation. As Byram and Feng (2004: 164) argue, there is a gap in understanding 'how teachers and learners interact, how their discourse reveals their shared position as mediators, how their language reveals the acquisition of new concepts and rules whilst simultaneously revealing their ability to de-centre from their own and others' concepts to better understand both'. It is precisely this gap in understanding that this book aims to address.

## Why Mediation Matters

Arguably the most common activity that language teachers and learners engage in every day is the process of mediation, and yet little is known about this dimension of language teaching and learning, particularly in relation to an intercultural orientation. Mediation is a term that is understood in various ways and is commonly associated with notions of conflict or resolution of difference. However, when applied to a learning context, and in particular intercultural language teaching and learning, such notions are found wanting. Hence, it is timely to reconsider the notion of mediation and

investigate how it might be understood in the context of language teaching practice, drawing on understandings from both the fields of language teaching and sociocultural learning theory.

From the perspective of applied linguistics, and in particular language teaching, mediation has traditionally been associated with cross-cultural mediation (Dasli, 2011). A mediator is someone who acts as an 'intermediary' using his/her 'competence' to transfer meanings from one party to another, where these parties do not share the same language (Buttjes, 1991; Byram, 2003; Byram & Alred, 2002). Mediation, in this view, is a process of learning to 'read' a new linguistic and cultural system and transfer these meanings to another linguistic and cultural system. Understood in this way, mediation has largely been associated with the skill of translation and processes such as paraphrasing and summarising. Where mediation features in language curricula, and it seldom does, it has largely been framed as real-world problem-solving skills (Byram, 2013). In the area of 'cultural mediation', Zarate *et al.* (2004) argue that mediation is more than a skill and that greater attention is needed to the affective dimension of mediation including the role of attitudes and dispositions such as empathy, and the role of identity in engaging with otherness. Some recent work has begun to focus on areas such as identity (Tsai & Houghton, 2010), but it is not framed specifically in terms of mediation.

From a sociocultural learning theory perspective, mediation is the process whereby artefacts, both material and symbolic, are used to enable human mental activity (Lantolf, 1994; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985). Understandings of mediation in education are greatly influenced by Vygotskian views that learning occurs on both interpsychological and intrapsychological planes (Vygotsky, 1978). That is, new ideas and experiences are presented to the learner through social interaction and are transformed by the learner through individual cognition into his/her own knowledge. Mediation occurs in the 'zone of proximal development' where the novice (learner) is presented with new information and ideas by an expert (teacher) who uses a range of 'tools' to enable the transformation of the 'new' into the 'known'. In a formal education context, the teacher is the primary mediator of learning. According to this theory, the ultimate mediation tool through which learning takes place is language, as it represents a symbolic artefact through which we carry out social interaction and private mental functions, and build our conceptual systems of mental activity (Cole, 1994; Lantolf, 1994; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). In the foreign language classroom, language takes on even greater significance as it represents both a medium *for* learning (a symbolic artefact for social interaction and mental activity) as well as an object *of* learning (a symbolic artefact that represents alternative forms of knowledge and meaning).

This book brings together these perspectives on mediation as a basis for understanding how teachers mediate an intercultural orientation in language teaching. In doing so, the notion of mediation moves beyond a process of transferring meaning in communication or scaffolding knowledge for learning. Instead, it can be understood as the act of bringing (at least) two linguistic and cultural frameworks into a relationship, with an educative purpose. Mediation is thus an integral dimension of language teaching: a set of practices and ways of being that build connections between learners' existing and new language and culture frameworks, and in doing so, develop their own capability to act as intercultural mediators.

## An Overview of the Study

The primary concern of the research study was to investigate teaching practice and address the specific question: How do teachers of languages mediate intercultural language learning in practice? This section provides an overview of the study in terms of its design and methodology, the participants, including myself, and the context(s) in which the study took place. Examples of materials used during the study are available in the appendices.

### Design

The study was framed according to two key design features: case study and participatory action research (PAR). The study was based on case study methodology, adopting a collective case study in particular as it provides a basis for exploring both individual cases and the collective case overall, as Stake explains:

...a researcher may jointly study a number of cases in order to investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition. ...collective case study... Individual cases in the collection may or may not be known in advance to manifest some common characteristic. They may be similar or dissimilar, redundancy and variety each important. They are chosen because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases. (Stake, 2005: 437)

The collective case study provided a number of benefits for the study. A collective case study does not require generalisability and instead takes as its starting point sensitivity to context. The study upon which this book is

based was not intended to create generalisations about language teachers as a cohort but rather to investigate the lived reality of three teachers and their students, with sensitivity and nuance. The collective dimension is provided through consideration of the range of experiences and mediation practices across the teachers. That is, it is possible to understand the individual in her context and also develop some sense of how this relates to others' experiences:

In a *collective case study* (or multiple case study), the one issue or concern is again selected, but the inquirer selects multiple case studies to illustrate the issue. (Creswell, 2007: 74)

The aim is not to describe a single, decontextualised instance, but to give a rich description of it and then some indication of how it may be connected or relevant beyond the individual instance. This kind of research aims to 'describe the cases in sufficient descriptive narrative so that readers can vicariously experience these happenings and draw conclusions' (Stake, 2005: 439).

A case study approach also provided the kind of flexibility and sensitivity needed to include a collaborative dimension that was crucial for the study. Drawing on the literature (Fantini, 1991; Papademetre & Scarino, 2000; Sercu, 2005) and my own teaching and research experiences, it was evident that it could not be assumed that the language teachers had already developed an intercultural language learning orientation in their teaching. Therefore, methods such as observation or interview would be insufficient and an approach was needed that could accommodate the teachers' development of this orientation. PAR (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998; Reason & Bradbury, 2008) offered such an approach, providing support for the teachers to develop a considered understanding of intercultural language learning, while retaining the focus on mediation. As the teachers engaged in the research process, they explored understandings, experimented with their practice and reflected on the experiences and their views. The research process itself, with regular planning and debriefing discussions, enabled the participants to consider and adjust their views and practices over time. They were supported to reimagine and remake themselves through developing insights into their practice and underpinning theories and knowledge. This was a case of 'theory developing practice and practice developing theory' (Robertson, 2006: 309). This research method was also valuable in that it closely aligns with theories of intercultural language learning in which individuals encounter new ideas and ways of being, and are transformed through dialogue and critical self-reflection.

Case study and PAR were also chosen as they can accommodate a longitudinal research perspective. This was important in order to capture

a range of mediation practices over time. Data were gathered over one full school year through an iterative process based on cycles of teaching and learning (see Appendix 1). The data show evidence of ways that the teachers build connections in learning over time such as referencing back and forth, and narrating their own experiences. While one school year was assumed to be sufficient, in the busy lives of teachers and their schools, the time proved to be quite limited and it was difficult to complete more than two full cycles of data collection. This longitudinal perspective on mediation is an area that is undertheorised and warrants further investigation in future research.

## Participants and their context(s)

The participants in the study were three secondary teachers of Indonesian (as a foreign language) teaching in schools in South Australia. In addition, each teacher selected a class of students to participate; a Year 9, 10 and 12 class. The students in these classes were participants in the sense that they were involved in their regular role as students in the language programme. Furthermore, I was also a participant in the process both as researcher and as collaborator, as will be discussed in more detail later.

Teachers of Indonesian were chosen for two reasons. Firstly, Indonesian is my second language (in addition to English as my first language) and the language that I have taught and been associated with professionally for many years. Sharing the language used by teachers and students provided an important avenue for collaboration with the teachers and for analysis of the data. Secondly, Indonesian is the third most commonly taught language (almost exclusively as a foreign language) in Australian schools (Kohler & Mahnken, 2010; Slaughter, 2009), hence it is potentially a major site for advancing an intercultural orientation in language teaching. Despite being a widely taught language, Indonesian resides within a fragile language policy context. Language policy in Australia, particularly in recent decades, has been driven in the main by federal government strategies and targeted programmes, particularly for Asian languages (MCEETYA, 1994, 2005). States and territories have developed their own outcomes-based curriculum and assessment frameworks that are generic across all languages. Materials for teaching particular languages are not mandated, even at the senior secondary level, where Year 12 external examinations are conducted. Teachers are free to interpret curricula frameworks, and select and develop teaching materials and assessment as they choose. There is a strong culture of professional learning driven by teachers' own interests as well as encouragement to 'implement' local initiatives such as cross-curricula concepts and use of information and communication technologies. Intercultural language teaching and learning

has emerged within this context. It is referred to in language planning documents but it is not mandated and instead is encouraged through professional learning programmes and materials (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009; Scarino *et al.*, 2007, 2008).

In relation to the teaching of Indonesian specifically, there is a history of language programmes in schools being taught by teachers with limited formal training in the language or in languages pedagogy (Kohler & Mahnken, 2010; Worsley, 1994). Furthermore, in the tertiary sector, Indonesian is typically located in social sciences faculties, and is aligned with areas such as anthropology, political science and cultural studies (Worsley, 1994). The effect has been that many tertiary-trained language teachers have adopted a culture studies approach in their own teaching in schools. Combined with communicative language teaching, this has resulted in a somewhat positivist and 'exotic' treatment of culture as facts and information. In addition to the pedagogical orientation, Indonesian faces the challenge of how Indonesia and Indonesians are perceived in the Australian community. A number of traumatic events within Indonesia, such as the Bali bombings (2002), the Boxing Day tsunami (2004) and the arrest of a number of Australians on drug-trafficking charges (2004, 2005), have increased negative attitudes towards Indonesia in the community and exacerbated the decline in student participation in Indonesian language programmes in schools (Kohler & Mahnken, 2010; Slaughter, 2007, 2009). While these events had occurred several years prior to the research study, the attitudes among the Australian community continued to resonate (and still do) in schools, and were partly what the teachers in this study were attempting to counter in their teaching.

It is within this policy and social context that the three teachers agreed to participate in the study. The names of both the teachers and the students have been changed to pseudonyms in the interests of anonymity.

### *Collette*

Collette has been teaching for over 15 years with experience in two large secondary schools, including her current school. She is of Anglo-Celtic background, with English as her first language, and she is married to an Indonesian, whom she met while studying in Indonesia, and with whom she has two children. She converted to Islam as part of her commitment to her husband's family.

Collette teaches Indonesian in a large, prestigious, non-denominational private school in the metropolitan area. She teaches Year 7 to Year 12 students who sit for the externally assessed Indonesian examination at the end of Year 12. The school prides itself on academic achievement and

expectations of student achievement are high. School-based examinations begin in Year 8 and are conducted twice a year. The particular class that Collette chose for this study was her Year 9 Indonesian group. The class consisted of 12 students, 8 girls and 4 boys. Collette's reasons for selecting this group were that (a) they were highly motivated to learn, (b) the group was not too large or small with sufficient interaction without distracting the teacher and (c) the level was not 'high stakes' and therefore there was some degree of flexibility with the course content.

### *Kelly*

Kelly learned Indonesian through her secondary school education and she spent time in Indonesia as part of her university study, completing a six-month intensive language course at an Indonesian university in central Java. Kelly is a first language speaker of English and grew up in a rural community in which she is now teaching; a community with German heritage and an area that is becoming increasingly culturally diverse.

At the time of the study, Kelly had five years' experience as a teacher of Indonesian. She had worked in one school and was the assistant head of house having responsibility for administrative matters. Kelly worked with one other teacher of Indonesian across Years 8–12 and she also taught physical education.

The school is a Catholic school located on the outskirts of a large country town, which is becoming an outer suburb of the metropolitan area. The school has approximately 800 students, male and female, most of whom live locally and are of predominantly Anglo-Celtic or European background. The school has a Catholic ethos, priding itself on community spirit as well as academic achievement. Indonesian is the only language offered at the school and it is compulsory in Year 8 for one semester.

The class chosen by Kelly for this study was Year 10 Indonesian. There were 15 girls and 6 boys in the group, with a couple having travelled overseas and the majority with some experience of having travelled within Australia, largely within South Australia. Kelly considered the group to be largely monocultural with rather limited experiences and narrow views of the world beyond their immediate environment.

### *Maria*

Maria is multilingual, with Italian being her first language, and English, French and most recently Indonesian, as additional languages. After a period of 10 years living in Italy, Maria made a conscious choice to learn Indonesian because of the proximity of Indonesia to Australia and the perceived relevance of Indonesia to young Australians in the future. Being a recent student of