



Focus principles: genuine social interaction; exploration and reflection; comparisons and connections

Focus key competencies: thinking; relating to others; using language, symbols, and texts; participating and contributing

Context

In the first year of the project Kelly, a teacher of Chinese, worked in a low decile full primary school in the North Island, and integrated Chinese into her mainstream Year 7/8 class for 45 minutes a week. Since the project's second year, Kelly has been teaching at a high decile full primary school, also located in the North Island. The school's additional language policy expects every Year 5 to 8 teacher to teach Chinese at least once weekly for 30 minutes. Teachers are offered professional learning and development opportunities for teaching and learning Chinese and the school currently has a Mandarin Language Assistant.

Kelly considers herself a low-intermediate-level user of Chinese, who is still learning the language and recently had the opportunity to go to Beijing on a three-week scholarship, her only experience of going to China. She draws predominantly on a task-based approach with an emphasis on formulaic expressions (see East, 2012, Chapter 3). A typical lesson might include a song, a game and a task that involves as much interaction as possible in Chinese. At the beginning of the project, Kelly was integrating only small aspects of Chinese culture into her teaching programmes, and, by her own admission, “very superficially and without much thought.”

The inquiry

In her inquiry, Kelly wanted her students to learn about, and reflect upon, values and beliefs important to Chinese people in comparison to their own. To achieve her inquiry goal she used as foundations the topics of ‘family’ and ‘daily student life’ (first year of project), and ‘colour’ and ‘fashion’ (second year of project).

Inquiry in action

One lesson within the topic of ‘family’ focuses on ‘siblings’. This is a class of mostly Pacific Island students. Kelly sees this as providing rich opportunities for intercultural reflection, comparison and contrast. Her practice demonstrates alternation between Chinese and English. After revising family-related vocabulary, the students apply the vocabulary in a game called Memory, using only Chinese. For the memory activity, each table group has cards on the table, facing down. Kelly explains, “when turning a card over, you must say the word in English and in Mandarin [Chinese].” Kelly gives an example, and then, with instructions in Chinese, students have ten minutes to complete the memory game. Kelly moves around the room to support students. She responds to questions about how to pronounce words, and also reminds the students to listen to each other and speak, using the words (all this is done in Chinese).

After the game, Kelly switches to English for the cultural exploration. Her cultural focus is on family size. She tells her students about China’s ‘one-child policy’, the differences in application in urban and rural areas, and the preference for boys. Following this, the whole class undertakes a survey, in Chinese, on the number and gender of everybody’s siblings. This is challenging for some students due to the amount of language involved. The class comes together at the end of the lesson to share the results of the survey and take part in a discussion about the concept of ‘family’.



Sample of students' family tree

In a subsequent lesson the class spends the first few minutes recapping what they know about the ‘one child’ policy. Then they discuss how family life might be different for an only child in China. Kelly uses as an example the boy from a homestay family she had stayed with during the previous year. Students share words and phrases such as ‘boring’, ‘lonely’, ‘could be spoilt’, ‘shy’ and ‘they have no one to look up to’. For Kelly, these words demonstrate her students’ understanding of their own families as being “quite different - chaotic, noisy and often with lots of adults.” A student asks what the boy did for fun. The class nods when hearing that he kept himself occupied with cards, toys and video games, hobbies not too dissimilar to their own. Kelly notes that her students “were doing a good job at noticing the similarities and differences between this boy’s life and their lives.”

Another lesson within this topic focuses on the role of grandparents in China. After an initial revision of family vocabulary, Kelly talks about the members of her own family in Chinese while the students write down their understanding of it in English. Using a family tree, Kelly then moves to the intercultural focus. Kelly explains that names for grandparents differ in China depending on whether they belong to the mother’s or the father’s side of the family. She introduces pronunciation, pinyin and the characters for such terms, adding them to the family tree, particularly highlighting the character formation. This ‘culture-in-language’ episode is presented to the students in English. In the final phase of the lesson, the students complete their own family tree and write about their families using Kelly’s description of her own family as a model.

Reflections on the inquiry

Kelly wanted to inquire into ways to raise her students’ awareness of family similarities and differences between China and New Zealand. Reflecting on her inquiry, Kelly identified two issues. One issue was her perceived lack of knowledge as a non-native Chinese speaker and therefore, culturally, being an ‘outsider’. She explained, “I actually found it quite difficult when they started asking questions.” This was because she was “not an expert on it” and was “trying to learn the cultural information as I go.”

Another issue related to what Kelly perceived as the challenging nature of intercultural reflection. For example, the ‘one-child policy’ was “actually quite a controversial subject” and there were certain aspects that she did not want to explore, such as “the way many Chinese aborted young girls.” Kelly implicitly addressed this issue when she talked about the wanted child being a boy. However, she did not confront her students regarding the unbalanced gender-ratio and thought that topics like abortion would “not have been discussed with them before.” This meant that Kelly ended up “skirting around” some issues that she was not comfortable talking to the class about. This avoidance led Kelly to consider whether she really did exploit the intercultural aspects of the ‘one child policy’ deeply enough.

Kelly also explained another challenging learning and teaching episode that arose when looking at the topic of ‘family’.

As part of the series of lessons, Kelly created a short questionnaire that the students could take home to complete with their own families. She planned to use their responses to help them make connections or notice similarities between ‘family’ as conceptualised in China and in New Zealand. When asked how they would define a family, the students supplied what she saw as typical responses - ‘a group of people that look after you’, ‘people that love you’, ‘something you cherish’ and ‘friends’.

However, when Kelly posed the question “How would you describe your family?” she received several unanticipated responses. A few students used words like ‘lazy’, ‘ugly’, ‘harsh’, ‘disrespectful’, ‘rough’. Their responses left Kelly feeling, in her words, “uncomfortable” and “unprepared.” However, this became part of Kelly’s own intercultural

learning. Kelly “had assumed that they were going to give me answers that I could relate to and make connections with.” She came to realise that “despite being from the same place, people can have very differing perspectives on the world and themselves.” This could make iCLT “confronting”. She reflected:

It occurred to me that through intercultural teaching and applying Newton’s principles to my language teaching practice, I thought I was trying to teach my students how similar we all are throughout the world. It also made me realise that defining something like ‘family’ through a cultural lens is very difficult. Every individual with every culture has a different worldview and perspective on family. The discussion made me realise that my focus should instead be on reflecting on just how different we are and how that is not a bad thing.

Other challenges in practice

Kelly also recognised the challenge of **trying to avoid a stereotypical view on culture**. She commented, “sometimes I just found it hard not knowing how far to go culturally because there are so many stereotypes out there.” This made her “worried about giving wrong information.” While she acknowledged that intercultural pedagogy should not focus on stereotypes, Kelly pointed out that they did exist. Although she was not sure how to address them, she acknowledged that they needed to be addressed, because, unless they were discussed, the students’ perceptions would not change.

A final challenge Kelly identified was that of **balancing language and cultural learning**. She felt she did not have as much time to focus on character learning or sentence structures as she had in previous years. She felt that the focus on intercultural knowledge seemed to have come at the cost of language input. Even though “cultural targets went up,” Kelly explained that “because I was discussing a lot of cultural stuff in English I felt personally that my language targets went down a little bit.” She estimated her target language (TL) input at 80% prior to the project, compared to just 50% when she included the cultural focus. Although she conceded that she could have prepared intercultural aspects in Chinese, she felt that this would have been beyond the students’ capabilities and more Chinese input about culture “would take away” some of the deeper student reflections. Nonetheless, she questioned whether her students would behave or think differently about Chinese people, and conjectured that such an effect could perhaps only be observed after a longer period of instruction.

Lessons learned

At the end of the entire project, Kelly was invited to reflect on her own personal journey, and the lessons she had learned as a consequence of her participation. With regard to shifts in her teaching, Kelly noted, “my lessons during the last two years have featured more whole class discussions where we reflect on the similarities and differences between two cultures in an effort to increase our knowledge and understanding of others.” Nevertheless, it was “difficult at times to integrate key ideas about the Chinese culture and that of New Zealand.” Kelly identified several reasons for this:

First, I believe that the depth of my knowledge of Chinese culture is limited due to being a foreigner and a non-native speaker of the language. I do not wish to inaccurately portray the Chinese culture due to my inexperience. Second, the reflection of one’s own culture is difficult and my students initially struggled. The idea of what ‘culture’ is and the process of reflection can be challenging, particularly as a kid. I know they had been asked to share cultural and linguistic knowledge before, but am unsure if they had ever been asked how much they actually know or understand about their own culture. What can you say about the culture of New Zealand when we are so diverse with our ethnic backgrounds?

Kelly sums up her own developmental journey like this:

My language teaching practice at the end of this project has developed to include an emphasis on the teaching of both language and culture. I still include a lot of discussion and reflection on diversity and endeavour to make and use tasks that include an aspect of cultural knowledge. This project has reminded me that my language teaching practice can and must change every year depending on the children in my class to effectively meet their learning needs - just like how it does in all of the other areas of the curriculum.

In the future I imagine my practice to be similar to how I currently teach, but hopefully I will have more confidence in two ways. First, I will have more confidence in my language abilities in Mandarin due to further study and experience. I would like to try to include more Mandarin through classroom instructions and formulaic expressions to increase my use of the TL once again as I feel this is of huge benefit to the students. Second, I hope to be more confident in increasing students’ awareness of Chinese culture, and the opportunity to actively reflect upon their own culture. I imagine that I will still discuss the comparisons and contrasts evident between languages and cultures, and this will hopefully get easier over time.

Discussion starters

Kelly experienced challenges when attempting to explore the concept of ‘family’ through a cultural lens. What challenges can you think of that might arise when exploring what might seem to be straightforward concepts?

Both Kelly and her students realised that it is not always easy to reflect on your own culture and that sometimes we are not aware of our own cultural perceptions, values or beliefs. How might learners be supported to become more aware of their own implicit perceptions, values and beliefs?

Kelly is concerned that she, as an ‘outsider’, does not have enough cultural knowledge and understanding to teach others about the target culture. She worries that, because of her lack of knowledge, she might introduce her students to cultural stereotypes. Do you think this is a legitimate concern? What do you think about introducing/avoiding stereotypes?

How might you address stereotypes if they come up?

Kelly is attempting to balance language and culture, but feels that, at times, one comes at the cost of the other. How might you find a balance between the two? Where do you think your priorities should lie when teaching the target language? Are you aware of your reasons for holding these priorities? How important do you think it is to teach about culture and intercultural understanding in the target language? What strategies could you use to approach culture in the target language?

Reference

East, M. (2012). TBLT in New Zealand: Curriculum Support. In M. East, Task-Based Language Teaching from the Teachers' Perspective (pp. 49-75). Amsterdam/Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.

Key Resource

Newton, J., Yates, E., Shearn, S., & Nowitzki, W. (2010). Intercultural Communicative Language Teaching: Implications for effective teaching and learning - a literature review and an evidence-based framework for effective teaching. Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Education.

Christine Biebricher was the author of this Engaging Example of Practice.