Focus principles: exploration and reflection; comparisons and connections.

Focus key competencies: (critical) thinking; relating to others; using language, symbols, and texts

Context

Mike teaches French as a mainstream teacher with a Year 7 class at a South Island intermediate school. The school is traditional in its organisation, with each teacher working in their own classroom with 25 to 30 students. All the teachers at Mike's school are expected to teach a language other than English, but, beyond that expectation, there is complete autonomy regarding which languages are taught and how. For Mike, teaching a language was something that "started as a subject I was required to teach that I had little skill, experience or enthusiasm for." However, during his 15 years as a teacher, Mike has taken advantage of language professional learning and development opportunities and states that language teaching is now "a major focus and strength of my weekly programme."

Mike describes his French proficiency as being low-intermediate, and he admits he still lacks confidence when speaking French. At the beginning of this project, Mike revealed that he was somewhat nervous about introducing a cultural element into his language teaching. As he put it: "I was concerned that I could be repeating and enforcing stereotypes, and this could have the opposite effect of the goal of intercultural language teaching." Mike was also concerned that a cultural element could detract from what he saw as the main focus of his language programme - language learning.

Planning the inquiry

One of the intercultural language teaching/learning tenets that particularly resonated with Mike was the importance of making explicit comparisons and connections between cultures and languages (Newton, et al.'s Principle 3). Mike saw the potential of using "culturally rich resources" and then "directing [the students] to make their own conclusions," as a way to remove the need for him to be "a cultural expert" and avoid passing on his own possible stereotypes. The key to this, and a significant departure from Mike's previous approach, was what he termed "intelligent questioning." By this, Mike meant that questions would be "planned and thorough," and would come "all the way through [lessons] rather than just a wee block at the end."

Having observed that his students seemed more naturally inclined to notice differences than similarities, Mike's primary intercultural goal for his inquiry was for his students to understand and appreciate commonalities as well as differences between cultures. Using the French school system as a linguistic and intercultural context, he sourced a range of authentic cultural resources from the internet to bring French culture into his classroom during two half-hour lessons per week. These included a poem, an article,

brief video clips, and a school timetable. Mike noted that the topic aligned well with his intended language foci for the term, which included time, dates, and expressing likes and dislikes. It was also something he felt his students would be "genuinely quite interested in."

Having completed his planning for the inquiry, Mike was "quite enthusiastic" about getting underway. However, despite this keenness, he still wondered whether spending time on culture would detract from the language learning, and whether the language in the authentic resources might prove to be too challenging for his beginner learners.

Inquiry in action

Mike's inquiry began on the first day of Term 2, by which time his students had already learned some basic French vocabulary, including greetings and numbers. Mike played a video clip of a French student reciting a poem about returning to school after the summer break (French Today, 2011).* The students listened and then read along in French. Mike asked the class to compare the young French student's thoughts with their own ideas about returning to school after the holidays. This served to introduce the topic and activate the students' schema for the inquiry. Over the next few lessons, the class watched some short videos of French students describing their school day, extended their number knowledge and fluency, and learned to tell the time in French.

The vocabulary focus of one of the lessons was 'days of the week'. The students were each given a French school timetable (Loescher Editore, 2010, 0.18sec)* and asked to translate it. They were able to quickly work out most of the subjects, and, with some prompting, they also decoded some other words. Mike planned initially to ask the students a series of

French student reciting a poem

factual questions based on the information in the timetable, but the lesson took a slightly different course because "the students were fascinated about several differences and wanted to discuss [them] immediately." They compared the French school week with their own, focusing particularly on the length of the school day and having 'free periods'. Mike guided the students to also look for similarities, and probed to elicit the students' thoughts and feelings about the differences and commonalities. This led to a lively discussion about which system the students would prefer if they were able to choose, and which they thought French students might prefer.

Towards the end of the lesson, Mike returned to his original plan and asked the students questions (in English) to test their reading and understanding of the timetable. Given their very beginner status, he expected the students to answer in English, and most did.

However, after two students spontaneously tried to answer in French, others followed their lead. The final questions were all answered in French. Mike stated that in his experience, "this is rare."

In a later lesson, Mike introduced formulaic phrases for expressing likes and dislikes. He reused the French school timetable as a resource for this lesson, as it was something the students were already familiar with and were "quite interested in." In the process of reviewing the students' understanding/memory of the vocabulary in the timetable, Mike also talked about the origin of some of the words – linking Monday/lundi with moon/lunar, for example. This piqued some students' interest further, and prompted additional questions and animated discussion. The students were then asked to write sentences in French expressing their likes and dislikes, and they moved around, sharing these orally with their classmates.

When planning this lesson, Mike had anticipated the students would use subjects from the timetable for their likes and dislikes. However, a number of students became more creative, stating, for example, je n'aime pas lundi (I don't like Monday), j'aime récré (I like break time), and j'aime 15.00h (I like 3.00pm – i.e. when school finishes for the day). Some students also drew on language from previous lessons, and some asked for words they hadn't yet learned in French

French school timetable

– words for sports they played and things they did on the weekend, for example. A few students who were sometimes more reluctant to participate also engaged enthusiastically with this activity and shared their ideas with the full class.

Reflecting on the inquiry

As Mike reflected on the impact of the inquiry, he was particularly mindful of the increases he had observed in his students' motivation for language learning. Mike attributed his students' increased engagement and interest, at least in part, to the "relevant, authentic and engaging context" that the intercultural focus provided. The changes in motivation extended beyond the students. Mike confessed that he found the intercultural focus had also increased his own curiosity and interest, and was reinvigorating. Indeed, the intercultural resources and discussions removed a burden Mike had felt "to be an expert," and provided a platform for him to continue learning alongside his students. As the inquiry progressed, Mike realised that his initial concern about the language in the authentic resources being too challenging for his students was

"unfounded." Instead, he observed that "the authentic context aided comprehension and students enjoyed the challenge of 'decoding' the resources." One of the students confirmed this, remarking that he liked "hearing other people who are native speakers. It doesn't matter if you don't know all the words – you go on what you know."

Mike also noticed that his students appeared to remember a lot of the language they had previously learned quite quickly. He attributed this to the learning "having been put into a more solid cultural context." He also commented that, at times, the students engaged with resources in ways that he hadn't planned for or foreseen. In the first lesson using the school timetable, for example, some students worked out how many hours the French students were in class over a whole week; this was something Mike said he "hadn't even thought of doing," but it added richness to the class discussion.

Mike's apprehension that the inclusion of a cultural dimension would reduce language learning also turned out to be unfounded. He noted that, even though he was spending less time on explicit language teaching, the students "are actually picking up the same amount." He reported there was also more evidence of the students "wanting to give the language 'a go.'" Material that was initially introduced as a 'cultural resource' sometimes became a springboard for his students to use more target language in the lessons, and to go beyond what they were explicitly taught. Mike was sometimes surprised at his students' additional vocabulary, including some quite obscure words, although he wondered if perhaps in the past there hadn't been opportunities for his students to demonstrate what they did know. He also noticed that, in contrast to previous years, "the students' language usage was fun and adaptive … they were trying to communicate."

Mike was also aware that, in comparison to his earlier language lessons, his questioning had evolved. Whereas before, cultural questioning and discussion came at the very end of lessons, if at all, deeper reflective questioning had now become a more integral and planned part of Mike's language classes. His students were very interested in the differences between their lives and those of similar aged students living in France. But Mike also wanted them to realise that "culture is more complex than just a couple of generalisations." Thoughtful questioning helped him guide his students to "discuss these new things."

Challenges in practice

Mike's first intercultural inquiry (which he undertook the year before this one) used the theme of food as a context. An initial challenge he encountered was the time it took on the internet to source the authentic resources he wanted. Mike confessed that this contributed to him feeling a little overwhelmed when he set out to plan for the current inquiry. However, looking back, he was surprised at the extent to which "it was actually much faster and more efficient this time." It had taken him less than a day to locate an interesting range of resources and complete the planning. Mike speculated that the choice of topic may have been a factor in this, although he also pointed out that having done one inquiry,

"I now know what I'm looking for." Based on his experiences the previous year, Mike was also more confident to reuse the culturally rich resources with different language or intercultural goals – something that made planning "much more manageable."

Final lessons learned

As he looked back on the whole project, Mike recalled that he began the project "with an open mind and a willingness to try something different." However, he also remembered being very concerned about the risk that intercultural communicative language teaching (iCLT) would turn language learning into a social studies lesson and reduce language learning opportunities. Based on the inquiry described above, Mike now feels assured that this need not be the case.

In the process of exploring ways to enhance his students' intercultural understandings, Mike had thought deeply about his pedagogy. He pointed out that he now finds it easier to agree with the framework presented in the *New Zealand Curriculum* whereby *language knowledge* and *cultural knowledge* interweave to support the *communication* strand. He explained:

I now believe simply iCLT is good teaching. Basing lessons in an authentic context, having a bigger picture, making lessons relevant to learners, allowing students room to explore, challenging their pre-existing ideas and asking for their point of view are all tenets of good constructivist teaching.

While emphasising that he was "not throwing the baby out with the bath water," Mike concluded that he was quite comfortable with iCLT – "it suits me, so I'm going to keep on doing it.

Discussion starters: a focus on getting a balance

In this story, the students tended to be drawn more instinctively to notice differences between themselves and others. How important do you think it is it to guide them to discuss similarities as well? Why?

One of Mike's initial concerns was that introducing intercultural noticing and reflection could encroach on the time available for language teaching – and, by implication, for language learning. To what extent do you think this would be an issue in your own class?

Mike was also concerned that, with an intercultural focus, his language classes might become more like Social Studies lessons. How would you describe the distinction between intercultural language learning and Social Studies? What sorts of things might need to be done (or avoided) to prevent this happening?

Mike speculated that the 'context' of this inquiry – that is, the French school system –

played a part in his students' increased engagement. What other contexts, or topics, do you think might be similarly motivating for Year 7/8 students?

References

French Today. (2011, September 19). "Je voulais dans mon cartable" de Pierre Ruaud, said by Leyla [Video file]. Retrieved from https://youtube.com/watch?v=RchlBdiakBw
Loescher Editore. (2010, February 11). Français – Journal de ados: L'école [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iww3eUDIGM4

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.

Jocelyn Howard was the author of this Engaging Example of Practice.