



Focus principles: exploration and reflection; comparisons and connections

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

Context

Kathryn teaches Japanese at an intermediate school in the North Island that has historically offered a range of languages to its students. A significant support for the inclusion of languages is the school's recent accreditation to offer the International Baccalaureate (IB) which includes in its vision "creating internationally minded people" (International Baccalaureate, 2013). All teachers in the school teach basic Te Reo Māori and teachers with some proficiency in an international language teach that language to students in a team, usually consisting of approximately 120 students. The timetable has 'teaming slots' once or twice a week where groups of 32 students rotate through 30-minute slots of languages, physical education and ICT.

All language teachers in the school have received specialised professional learning and development in teaching languages. This PLD has influenced Kathryn's choice to adopt the IRDPX method (Gilbert, 2009) to teach vocabulary. She also has some familiarity with the ten Ellis principles (Ellis, 2005).

At the beginning of the project, Kathryn acknowledged that she did not feel comfortable

teaching Japanese, a language she learned at high school and university. She currently describes her proficiency as low-intermediate since she has “not used the language for over 25 years.” She revealed her initial belief that the aim of language teaching was to “reach perfection in the way the students spoke the language,” with an expectation of “reaching a native-like proficiency.” To achieve this, she emphasised repetition of vocabulary and structures which she presented via songs, video clips and games. Even though her stated goal was for “students to leave my class knowing that ‘hey, I’m good at languages,’” Kathryn believed that the structure of language delivery at her school hindered the students’ retention of language.

Against this background, for Kathryn the six Newton, et al. (2010) principles were “a revelation.” They opened her eyes to what she saw as more realistic aims to language teaching by focusing on the development of interculturality. This released her from the expectation that her students needed to be perfect for there to be communication, and led to a shift in purpose, which was “to provide students with a ‘taster’ of language learning and a snapshot of the way other countries function.”

Planning the inquiry

Kathryn chose to focus her inquiry on Newton, et al.’s Principles 3 and 4. She thought that Principle 3 went well with the school’s focus on reflecting through students’ inquiries. She also wanted to work on her students’ understanding of both similarities and differences across cultures (Principle 4). She wanted “to lead my students into viewing the culture through a neutral lens,” and going beyond facts about culture to “more the thinking behind them.”

Kathryn set up a student inquiry into food in Japan that would take a whole school term. She identified internet resources (websites and YouTube videos) that the students could use to explore different aspects of the relationship of the Japanese people to food. Her students - who are highly digitally literate - worked in groups to research potential topics, then created KWL charts (What I know, what I wonder, and what I learned) in shared Google documents where they organised the information they had found. The information was then shared with the class on a poster. Students were then directed to provide feedback to each other about their poster. Finally, each group wrote a reflective statement about the process.

As an organised and methodical person, Kathryn felt that planning for this inquiry suited her well.



Working on KWL chart

For the first time as a teacher of languages, she felt in control and prepared for the term through a process of “figuring out the end point and working back to how to get there and then breaking it down really specifically.” This gave her “the confidence to know exactly what I was doing and teach towards it.” Another important realisation motivated by the inquiry was that the KWL charts would provide tangible evidence of the students’ cultural learning, something she had not considered before. Kathryn was aware that the exclusive focus in this inquiry into Japanese food culture might side-line learning the language, but she felt that “my language classes aren’t just about language.”

Inquiry in action

To start the unit on ‘food’, Kathryn’s classes learned the vocabulary of food names in Japanese, the expressions for ‘like’, ‘dislike’ or ‘love’, and some of the cultural protocols around food. Throughout these lessons, the students watched video clips of Japanese food in different contexts. Kathryn wanted her students to go “beyond observing eating sushi with chopsticks” to other contexts such as the food eaten in school, the changes in Japanese diet over time, the aesthetic presentation of food, table manners, etc. These preliminary lessons drew on the IRDPX principle of introducing language where Kathryn built from isolated words to sentences. Language was always first introduced orally and practised with songs and games before the students saw it in written form and eventually wrote it down in their books. During the lesson there was a presentation of the language either by Kathryn or a video clip, then students would repeat chorally. They would then do some oral pair work and complete some worksheets. After these language-focused lessons, Kathryn introduced the inquiry plan to the students and set up the groups’ shared documents that they would use for the rest of the term. Since the students are used to the inquiry cycle, the expectations of the Japanese food task seemed well-known to them. The students’ strong ICT skills enabled them to navigate and research online confidently. They were also comfortable working in groups and - for the most part - managed their work independently from teacher close-monitoring.

Kathryn’s role during the group work sessions was to keep the students on track. She allowed time for groups to explore different topics yet announced a deadline for when they should have decided on a topic. She hoped that the inquiry would make the students “richer in their understanding of Japanese, not just the language.” She insisted that “we were looking at the cultural aspect of life in Japan and the context we are using is food and they are looking at



Working on shared document

different thoughts and attitudes and behaviours around that.” It was important to her that students did not just identify isolated facts about their chosen topics, but that they investigated the reasoning behind particular ways for doing things.

Each step of the inquiry took longer than Kathryn initially planned, and she decided to extend the time initially allocated to the unit because she was pleased with the level of engagement she was observing in her students. She deemed the inquiry learning to be a success because “they’re thoroughly enjoying what they are finding out and they are enjoying sharing it with other people too and discussing it.” Kathryn acknowledged that some of the groups’ posters, planned as the last product of the inquiries, did not fully reflect the richness of the process. However, the fact that there were tangible products for all to see was pleasing to her.

Reflecting on the inquiry

Kathryn began her reflection on the process by commenting that she considered her students’ inquiries “really worthwhile. They loved it. They feel knowledgeable, and they feel like they have a proper understanding of [Japanese culture].” The increased and sustained engagement with the inquiries was in her view a good measure of the potential of the intercultural focus. She was delighted to see how the students were able to draw similarities and differences across cultures, not only between Japan and New Zealand, but also with their own ethnicities. She felt her students “connected with Japan. They were passionate about what they had found. The inquiries gave them ownership of all they had learned.” Since there was no guarantee that students would continue with the language after intermediate school, Kathryn felt that this intercultural focus, which had “really fulfilled the kids,” would increase their motivation to take a language when they moved to high school. Kathryn also thought that an important outcome of deepening students’ knowledge of Japanese culture was for her students to feel “a connection with Japan.” Finally, Kathryn mentioned that a consequence of a stronger focus on interculturality was that “I am talking to students more about the way they think / do things in their culture, rather than lumping all my students together as ‘us’”. In other words, Kathryn was acknowledging and responding to the diverse learners in her own classroom (Newton, et al.’s Principle 5).

When reflecting about changes in her teaching, Kathryn mentioned three aspects. First, she talked about a shift in attitude about language teaching. Whereas initially she was “trying to cram as much language as I could to compensate for the lack time we have for learning,” she was now “far less stressed on the fact that they don’t retain anything with our short times frames.”

There was also a shift in Kathryn’s expectation of “perfection in language.” Her initial frustration “when students mispronounced words or put the wrong word into sentences” had turned to a feeling of enormous relief when she encountered Newton, et al.’s Principle 6 which shifted the ideal from “native-speaker competence to communicative competence.” Although she still regarded accuracy as important, she became more

comfortable “focusing on communication, not perfection.”

The third change in Kathryn’s practice was the inclusion of culture not solely “as mere snippets of things I remembered or had heard about that happened in Japan,” but as having equal attention to language in the way she planned her course. She noted, “I decided to plan the whole unit thoroughly in advance, specifically searching out different cultural areas that I could include.” As a consequence, she felt that “my lessons were more interesting and with more information about similarities and differences.” Her planning in advance allowed her to see that, since inquiry was central to IB schools, she could have her students inquiring into aspects of Japanese culture. Up to then, she “simply hadn’t thought of student inquiries as a part of my language programme.” The intercultural inquiry made it clearer for her to see a way forward in her intercultural teaching, without having to know it all herself.

Challenges in practice

Kathryn knows that the structure of language delivery in her school is a significant limitation on the goals set for what the students can learn in their two intermediate school years. Her inquiry allowed her to see ways in which successful language learning can still happen. She acknowledges, “I am still not 100% convinced that it is easy to get the balance between language learning and culture,” but she is committed to continuing to explore ways to make it work. She would also like to be able to connect the languages more strongly to the IB themes that are agreed by the school.

Another challenge that Kathryn wants to overcome is her own limited proficiency in Japanese. An outcome of the inquiry for her was that she realised how much she loves Japanese. She wants to enhance her proficiency and eventually apply for a scholarship to spend some time in Japan. Her school has a long-standing relationship with a school in Japan. Groups of students from both schools spend a few weeks every year being in each country and Kathryn would want to use these opportunities to boost students’ motivation and further her school’s knowledge and interest in Japan and the Japanese language.

Kathryn is aware that learning about other cultures is time consuming and still wonders how busy primary teachers can find the time to locate appropriate cultural resources for their language teaching.

Final lessons learned

Kathryn started this project as a teacher who had arrived to language teaching without a strong background in the language or in language pedagogy. Before this inquiry, she felt stressed about her Japanese lessons, not only because of contextual restrictions to the time she had available with the groups of students she was teaching, but also because of her own beliefs about the aims of language teaching. These beliefs were compounded by her insecurity about her own knowledge of and proficiency in the language.

As she came to know the Newton, et al. principles and revisited the goals set by the New Zealand Curriculum for languages about the development of intercultural communicative competence, Kathryn started to see her teaching in a different light. The opportunity to inquire into her teaching allowed her to see how she could incorporate the Newton, et al. principles into her own practice and she has been pleased with the results so far. She is willing to try to find a balance between language aims and culture aims.

Towards the end of the inquiry, Kathryn realised that language teaching can be more strongly connected to other aspects of her school, including the IB themes and the emphasis on reflective learning through student inquiries. Mid-way through her inquiry Kathryn was appointed as head of languages and her first action was to share her work in the 'food' unit with her colleagues. She now has a firm plan to motivate all students across the school to understand both their own and other cultures while learning a language. She plans to create a two-year plan where language and culture are interwoven into each school term in ways that would allow for some depth in both aspects. Kathryn is hopeful that increasing students' motivation for languages at intermediate school will mean more of them will study languages when they go on to secondary school.

Discussion starters

Kathryn realised that some of her beliefs about the aims of language teaching were creating unnecessary frustration. This seems to be a common occurrence in primary and intermediate schools where the teaching of languages is not included in teacher education programmes. How can teachers of languages in primary schools be better equipped to teach languages?

One of Kathryn's contextual limitations was the structure of language teaching at her school where groups of students rotate through several discrete subjects for 30 minutes once or twice a week. If time limitation is the case in your school, how have you overcome that? Have you found alternative ways to better structure language teaching in busy primary classrooms?

Kathryn was concerned that busy primary teachers with limited knowledge of the language and culture they are teaching do not have time to better resource their language lessons. What resources do you use in your language teaching? How have you found out about useful resources?

References

Ellis, R. (2005). Instructed second language acquisition: A literature review. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education.

Gilbert, J. (2009, February). IRDPX. Retrieved from: <http://learninglanguageswaikato.wikispaces.com/file/detail/IRDPX.doc>

International Baccalaureate. (2013). What is an IB education? Retrieved from: <http://www.ibo.org/globalassets/digital-toolkit/brochures/what-is-an-ib-education-en.pdf>

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.

Constanza Tolosa was the author of this Engaging Example of Practice.