Introduction

Intercultural learning and teaching

This book is a starting place for the observation, description and evaluation of different cultures, the learners' own, and those of speakers of other languages. The concept of *inter*cultural activities may possibly still require some explanation, although the development of intercultural language learning and teaching has now been ongoing for over two decades. The principles of intercultural language education are firmly embedded, for example, in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (Council of Europe, 2001). There, its aims are summarised as follows (p.1):

> *In an intercultural approach, it is a central objective of language learning to promote the favourable development of the learner's whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture.*

Intercultural learning and teaching raise some fundamental challenges to previous models of language education. First of all, they challenge the conventional goal of language education as 'native-like proficiency'. For many learners, this is a distant, even unattainable goal. It is also, many teachers now argue, an unnecessary one. In a world where English is increasingly used as a *lingua franca*, it seems sensible to accept that it is more important for a language learner to communicate effectively in a range of more or less familiar contexts, than to be able to mimic the linguistic conventions found in, say, the USA, Australia or Great Britain.

Even so, the displacement of 'native-like proficiency' as the main goal of a language curriculum is not a trivial matter. Something of substance must occupy the vacuum. Intercultural language learning substitutes for 'native-like proficiency' the more immediately achievable goals of 'cultural exploration and mediation'. Intercultural learners *use* language to explore different cultures, and to mediate in those situations where cultural misconceptions occur. They do this with increasing sophistication, drawing on their accumulating cultural knowledge and developing skill in using

the resources of the target language. They are also encouraged to employ personal qualities such as empathy, open-mindedness and respect for others.

Crucially, intercultural exploration involves discovering one's own culture as well as the cultures of others. Many of the activities in this book focus first on the *home* culture; an extensive resource that has hitherto been largely neglected in the second language classroom. Through the activities, learners look anew at their own community's behaviour, practices and values and prepare to explain them to people whose behaviour, practices and values differ. In order to accomplish this, learners need to develop skills in cultural observation, description, explanation and evaluation. Furthermore, learners require a forum in which to share and discuss their findings with people from other cultures. In some teaching situations the class will itself be multicultural, and therefore it will naturally provide an arena for intercultural exchange and discussion. In many situations, however, learners may share their linguistic and cultural insights with others via electronic media such as web-based discussion forums or virtual learning environments. This book gives advice on how to set up online intercultural communities, and how to promote online discussions.

Intercultural communicative competence

An intercultural language curriculum, then, has language goals complementing the competences and skills required for cultural exploration and mediation. The detailed specification of intercultural communicative competence is still a developing project, although much work has been accomplished in this area by Michael Byram and his colleagues. In documents such as the *Common European Framework*, intercultural communicative competence is conceived of as a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes. With reference to Byram's work, we can summarise these as follows: (a) knowing the self and the other; (b) knowing how to relate and interpret meaning; (c) developing critical awareness; (d) knowing how to discover cultural information; and (e) knowing how to relativise oneself and value the attitudes and beliefs of others. Let us consider how this book addresses these five aspects of intercultural communicative competence.

Knowing the self and the other

Intercultural language learners need to acquire an understanding of how interaction works, and how individuals relate more generally to those

around them and to society at large. People often find a way of relating to others by joining certain clubs or leisure groups or taking up particular hobbies. In these settings, they often bond with others by gossiping, and telling stories or anecdotes about their lives and experiences, thus offering the opportunity to dramatise and negotiate their personal and group values. Intercultural language learners can be encouraged to explore, describe and compare social groups and see how they use patterns of communicative interaction to sustain a sense of identity.

The impulse to explore and categorise requires a counterbalancing caution. Individual learners are, as every teacher knows, real people who rightly resist stereotyping as a 'typical' member of this or that group. 'Knowing the self and the other' therefore depends on understanding the complex interactions between individuals and groups, and how individuals actively negotiate their multiple identities in the context of different communities. The language activities suggested in this book encourage learners to enhance their knowledge of the dynamic relations between individuals and groups by examining, for example, how people dramatise their values through the stories they tell, and how people interact through their silences and gestures as much as their words.

Knowing how to relate and interpret meaning

The exploration of language and culture is, at heart, a search for meaning. Meaning can obviously be communicated via spoken or written language, in a variety of genres – a lecture, a conversation, a shouted warning, a newspaper report, a scholarly article, an email, a posting in an internet chat room, a blog, or even an old-fashioned letter. Learners need to be exposed gradually to an ever-increasing range of such genres, each of which serves a particular purpose for the community of speakers and writers that uses it. Many genres are governed by a relatively stable set of linguistic conventions which are appropriate to their cultural purpose. The style of a blog, for example, will not be the style of a scholarly article, just as the style of an informal conversation will not be the style of a lecture. As learners become familiar and confident with the conventions governing different genres, their communicative repertoire expands.

Meaning is also communicated non-verbally, through facial expressions, gestures, and even more general forms of behaviour. A beckoning finger or a nod of the head might have a particular meaning in a given culture. Of

course, interaction works differently in different communities – periods of silence between conversational utterances, for example, have different lengths and a different significance for different speakers. Interruptions can also have different implications, even within a single community, depending, say, on whether the person who is interrupting is male or female. It has been suggested by some scholars that men tend to interrupt in order to take control of conversational topics, while women's interruptions are generally more cooperative, and are designed to support the speaker. Personal preferences such as the wearing of black eye-shadow or covering one's head also have a variable set of meanings, depending on who and where you are. Preferring one type of car to another, following a particular rock band or classical composer, manicuring one's nails or adopting a vegetarian lifestyle – all these types of behaviour can also send out a message about the kind of person you are and the values you hold. The very instability of meaning makes non-verbal behaviour a perennially fascinating resource for cultural exploration.

Culture is the expression of the values and beliefs of a community – and the community, in turn, may be defined in terms of age, gender, profession, ethnicity, social class, nationality, or even affiliation to some social activity such as sport, theatre-going, consumption of literature, and so on. A dance class that is held in a particular city will have its own 'culture', its unwritten rules of acceptable behaviour, and its participants might even share a special language, of, say, reels, jigs and strathspeys. But there are also trans-national cultures of professionals such as business people or scientists, football fans, music fans and film fans, and adherents to political or social causes. Migration and the mass media have accelerated and intensified the transcultural flow of ideas, practices and behaviours that are global in extent but local in inflection. Chinese restaurants, for example, can be found in many countries around the world – but the menus found in San Francisco or Dublin will be different from those found in Beijing. Reggae music has expanded from its Jamaican roots, but its manifestations in other countries express their own regional identity. Ultimately, all cultural phenomena generate meanings that have to be interpreted in relation to the local conventions and values of the specific community that has created or adopted and adapted them.

The intercultural activities in this book, then, focus on different kinds of community at home and in other countries. Some of the activities focus on the organisation, symbols and language used in these communities. These activities encourage learners to develop skills in interpreting these cultural

symbols and language, and to relate them to the values, expectations and purposes that have generated them.

Developing critical awareness

Intercultural language education begins with the assumption that contact between cultures should be mutually enriching for the individuals and communities involved; however, it is undeniable that contact between cultures has historically taken place in conditions of invasion, colonialism, forced immigration and economic migration. In short, the conditions of contact between languages and cultures have too often been marked by differences in power, opportunity, and access to intellectual and material resources. Intercultural language learners have to acknowledge these historical processes and be critically aware of their continuing impact. For example, language learners need to be critically aware and politically engaged with the negative consequences of globalisation, such as the potential erasure of local cultural traditions. However, multiculturalism has been criticised for going too far the other way by treating all cultural values as equally acceptable, and therefore, for example, for tolerating oppressive practices against women or minority groups, if those practices are sanctioned by tradition. Intercultural language education treats all cultural values as open to debate, and subject to critical examination and negotiation. That said, these debates should ideally be characterised by principles of empathy and respect for others.

Some of the chapters in this book, then, directly address topics such as politics and religion that, in the past, some language teachers have rightly treated cautiously. The intercultural classroom, at best, can become a safe space for engagement with differences in belief and ideology, not so that some false consensus can be imposed, but in order to promote genuine understanding and respect.

If its emphasis is solely on direct political engagement, however, intercultural language education can appear to be overly solemn and earnest. That is not the case with most of the activities in this book which are designed to encourage the exploration and celebration of everyday life and behaviour, from walking in the park to enjoying a performance by street artists. Even so, some of the intercultural activities are explicitly designed to engage learners with social issues, to invite learners to consider alternative ways of being and acting, and to foster respectful ways of questioning cultural practices that seem unacceptable.

Knowing how to discover cultural information

The intercultural language learner is one who develops an increasingly sophisticated means of discovering cultural information. The two pillars of this approach derive ultimately from the academic pursuits of *ethnography*; the systematic observation and description of cultural practices, and *semiotics*; the observation, description and analysis of sign systems, such as language itself, but also systems like non-verbal communication, visual symbolism, fashion and dance.

This book follows many others in arguing that ethnography begins at home. The description of the learners' home culture can be a rich and motivating stimulus to second language learning, particularly if the home culture is to be shared and discussed with people from other cultures. And so we invite learners to visit familiar places, the better to observe and describe local linguistic and cultural practices in such everyday settings as supermarkets, hairdressers and cafés before comparing and discussing their descriptions with classmates and then sharing their insights online with 'e-partners' elsewhere around the globe.

The second major strand in the book is semiotic. Many of the activities invite learners to consider how conversational conventions work in first and second languages, how non-verbal behaviour impacts on communicative acts, such as greeting and persuading, and how visual communication is used publicly in genres such as advertising, and privately in contexts such as dressing up for an evening out. As well as developing an ethnographic imagination, then, intercultural language learners should, over time, become adept at 'reading' and interpreting an ever broader range of linguistic and cultural practices.

Knowing how to relativise oneself and value the attitudes and beliefs of others

Intercultural language education should not lead to uncritical acceptance of the values and beliefs of others, and intercultural language learners should develop inquiring and open minds when faced with otherness. Many of the activities in this book address issues that the learner might at first find strange in the culture of others – for example, attitudes to food, beauty, religion and politics. One way of encouraging respect for the unfamiliar is to make the familiar strange, by 'decentring' one's perspective of one's own culture. Literary texts and other cultural forms of expression, like film

and music, have long been recognised as effective means of dramatising strangeness in other cultures, as well as effective ways of defamiliarising the everyday, and they are used in this book, too, to stimulate discussion of other ways of being.

This book addresses a set of skills and competences that have come to be seen as integral to intercultural language education. It does so in a world that is rapidly changing, particularly in the opportunities afforded to learners in different countries to engage in communication directly with speakers and writers from other cultures. Whereas a mere decade or so ago many learners might complain that they would never have the opportunity to use their second language with other speakers, now the revolution in global communications has made contact between language users worldwide instant and inexpensive.

The Internet and intercultural language education

The arrival of the Internet has already reshaped intercultural language education for many learners. But the challenge to intercultural language educators is how to combine classroom teaching with the manifest opportunities offered for formal and informal learning. On the plus side, learners today have unparalleled access to channels of instant, interactive communication with English users worldwide. Never before have they enjoyed such rich opportunities for 'authentic' language use and the comparison of different cultural practices. On the negative side, unhappier experiences of online discussions can show learners easily becoming frustrated by the different expectations of their 'e-partners', in, for example, the time, enthusiasm, and seriousness that they invest in their electronic interactions. Also, in some cases, the widely different political values of partners in an online exchange undermine the building of respect and empathy necessary for an effective exchange of views.

Effective online exchanges, like other educational initiatives, need to be managed, and even then, their success is never guaranteed. Nevertheless, the rewards of building an effective online community of learners outweigh the various risks that teachers and learners face. Many of the activities in this book, then, assume that learners will have access to the Internet, whether in the classroom, the home or through an internet café. Most of the activities can still be done without such access, but the activities will be greatly enriched if you can help learners find and participate in an online intercultural community. The initial activities in this book are directed

towards supporting you and your learners in finding such communities, and in making good use of them. Technology is now outpacing educational practices in many ways – online communities are facilitated by social networking programs like Facebook, Bebo and Orkut, while a resource such as Tag Galaxy (www.taggalaxy.de) facilitates the sharing and display of photographs taken by participants from every corner of the planet. Ben Goldstein's *Working with Images* is one of a range of books that, like the present volume, seek to acknowledge and exploit many online resources now available to learners. The activities in *Intercultural Language Activities* encourage you and your learners to participate in more structured online projects than are presently offered by social networking programs, but the skills and attributes developed by the activities here can be transferable to different online environments.

Of course, the Internet is not only a forum where people from different cultures can meet; it is also an inexhaustible source of information about different cultures and societies. Some of the activities in this book invite learners to explore the wealth of information provided by the Internet. The activities encourage the use of internet resources to *discover* information by the critical reading of news websites, for example, or the use of online corpora to investigate language use. They discourage learners from simply finding a suitable website and cutting and pasting facts without processing them.

The Internet is also, like many powerful tools, open to abuse. It goes without saying that, particularly when establishing an intercultural community where children are exchanging information online, care must be taken to ensure that there is no exploitation of participants. The websites suggested in this book are of organisations that have a reputable track record of twinning educational institutions such as schools. In addition, one of the activities focuses explicitly on developing awareness of 'netiquette', the dos and don'ts of online intercultural exchange.

The organisation of this book

The book is intended to support a wide range of teachers who are involved in general English courses with teenagers and adults, working either in English-speaking communities or in non-English-speaking countries. The book can be dipped into for individual activities, or the activities can be followed in a sequence appropriate to the interests and language level of the learners.

The activities are intended to supplement the main syllabus or coursework

adopted by an educational institution; the section on *Icons*, for example, would naturally extend language practice in the description of people, while the debate on blood sports or politics gives further practice in the language of argumentation. Many of the topics and activities demand a certain level of maturity and are designed for teenagers and adults, with a language level of intermediate or above. They are intended to build on a basic knowledge of the world and to excite an interest in discovering more. The activities should help learners to enjoy making links between the familiar and the strange, the easy and the less comfortable, the self and the other. You will no doubt adapt these activities for the levels, needs and interests of your own learners, some activities being more suitable for younger learners than others. I trust, however, that the activities will help you and your learners to make many unpredictable and exciting intercultural connections.

Chapter 1 *Setting up an online community* gives practical advice on setting up computer-mediated intercultural exchanges, and some suggestions on how to start and develop online discussions. As noted above, simply providing a technological platform for online discussions does not guarantee their success, and the opening chapter of this book suggests ways of supporting learners as they become used to communicating through online discussion groups. Not all such discussions, however, are smooth or unproblematical. A key component of intercultural communicative competence is the ability to mediate between people in conflict, whose misunderstanding might well arise from differences in cultural perspective. Chapter 2 *Mediations* offers a set of activities encouraging learners to deal with incidents that potentially involve misunderstanding and disagreement. Chapter 3 *Domestic life* deals with the everyday nature of culture, and invites learners to look afresh at their own home lives and see themselves as others might see them. This chapter is complemented by the next one, 4 *Public spaces,* which moves outside the domain of the home to explore the public places of leisure and commerce. Chapter 5 *Face to face* builds up learners' understanding of aspects of conversation, with an emphasis on storytelling, body language and informal expression. The theme of oral communication is extended in Chapter 6 *Interviewing* to those particular skills necessary for learners to investigate culture through interviews with people from different walks of life. From oral skills, Chapter 7 *Interpretations* turns to reading and writing, with a series of activities designed to enhance the learners' engagement with written material, whether that material is traditional 'hard copy' or online resources such as freely available, searchable corpora of digitised texts.

At this point, the book turns to a series of what might be termed 'intercultural issues'. These chapters are topic-based and involve learners in reflecting on aspects of their own cultural experience and comparing these with the experiences of others. Chapter 8 *Childhood* invites learners to recall the period of their formation as individuals, and their integration into the community through school. Chapter 9 *Icons* focuses on the roles that famous figures and celebrities play in local, national and international life, paying particular attention to the values and qualities that they embody for different communities. Chapter 10 *Sport* considers, for example, how tribal loyalties are expressed by spectators, fans and cheerleaders and looks at unusual sports. Chapter 11 *Food* encourages learners to explore the different cultural meanings expressed by food, restaurants and supermarkets in different places. Chapter 12 *Politics* and Chapter 13 *Religion* broach sensitive subjects that new teachers of language are often warned against – for good reason. Even so, learners are often highly engaged with their political and religious beliefs, and, for this reason, despite the obvious challenges, these topics merit a place in an intercultural language curriculum. These topics also offer potential for integration of language classes with other courses across the curriculum, most obviously in the areas of history and the social sciences. At first glance, the final chapter, 14 *Presenting an image*, is less controversial, with its focus on fashion and appearance, and yet it addresses the no less serious issue of the messages we send to others in the ways we mould our personal appearance.

Using the CD-ROM

There are many photocopiable extracts in this book, varying from dialogues to observation schedules. All of these are to be found on the accompanying CD-ROM as PDF files. These can be projected in the classroom, or they can be printed out and handed to your learners. There are also photos on the CD-ROM and all the material is cross-referenced in the book so you can find the materials you need quickly and easily.

Website

For further information and extra materials please visit www.cambridge.org/elt/intercultural