

Intercultural language education in Australia

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IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS where we are required to mark and grade our students, it is easy to focus solely on their linguistic progress. However, we often need to step back and remind ourselves that a true benefit of language learning is intercultural understanding. Foreign languages play an important role in intercultural education. The term intercultural as used here refers to interaction between people from dissimilar backgrounds. Learning a language enables learners to communicate directly with people who speak the language, and makes learners become aware of their own language, culture, and their way of thinking (which is influenced by their language). In addition to the direct benefits of language learning, cultural diversity among learners can be an effective forum for intercultural learning.

Scholars interested in intercultural language learning in Australia include Angela Scarino, Anthony Liddicoat, Chantal Crozet, Adriana Diaz, Paul Moore, Alistair Welsh, and Michelle Kohler. Recently, the Intercultural Language Teaching & Communication cluster was formed as part of the Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU). My own research interests lie in the connections between intercultural competence development, learner diversity, and foreign language education. I have constructed and evaluated a collaborative intercultural learning environment using the 'Community of Inquiry Framework', which assumes that effective critical learning requires a community of inquiry.¹ It consists of three elements: teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence, which mutually support and improve a learning environment as a whole. Being based on social constructivist perspectives, knowledge is seen as something that is created and shared in social settings, both physical and online learning spaces. At the same time, the framework emphasizes that learners should be able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection. Above all, it underscores the important role of the teacher who designs and facilitates the formation and use of social and cognitive processes, for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes.

Findings from my research suggest that the maturation of key components of intercultural competence, which are knowledge/experience, awareness/comprehension and critical thinking skills, nurtures effective and appropriate communication and behaviour in intercultural situations.² Initially, learners' interactions were often superficial. In their reflective journals, learners tended to use basic understanding that evidenced shallow evaluations or limited reflections. As a result of the intercultural pedagogical techniques, such as collaborative learning, they increasingly engaged in conversations at a deeper level. At the same time, they gradually became aware of their own language use as they started to notice how others expressed their thoughts. They became aware of the limited range of their own knowledge and experience while listening to others. The interactions with people of different backgrounds broadened learners' perspectives, deepened their thoughts, and enriched their expressions. This study showed that critical thinking skills were crucial for transforming knowledge and experience into awareness and comprehension.

A learner's individual learning experience in an intercultural learning environment, however, varies considerably. The results of an in-depth analysis of journals kept by six learners (two international students, two local students with Asian background, and two local students with a relatively monocultural background) demonstrated that their learning

experiences were different - although they all expressed satisfaction with the intercultural learning experience.³ When learners were exposed to intellectually stimulating resources (text/people), there was a tendency for learners with richer multicultural experiences to exercise critical thinking, and construct and confirm meaning through discourse and reflection. However, the data also revealed that while prior intercultural experience of individual learners played a key role, both teaching presence and social presence also affected the exercise of critical thinking. The findings suggest that perceiving teaching presence correctly (i.e., understanding the value of intercultural learning) and utilising social presence (i.e., sharing experiences, thoughts and opinions) leads to exercising critical thinking, and consequently to greater cognitive presence (i.e., awareness and comprehension).

The findings of one of my other studies,⁴ on the other hand, show that there is no clear relationship between the critical thinking skills exhibited in the intercultural learning and learners' language performance, despite the general belief that critical thinking skills assist language learning. Critical thinking skills might be a factor in the improvement of language performance, but it was not the sole factor. Other factors also affected language performance, such as the current level of language ability (whether one was in the position of being able to learn from higher-proficiency peers), focus on language learning (whether one was attentive to one's own language use), and the relationship with other group members (whether one's group was sufficiently collaborative).

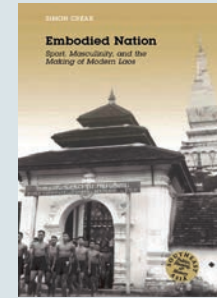
Interactions with others who have disparate cultural backgrounds are great opportunities for learners to recognize and understand themselves as "situated in their own language(s) and culture(s)".⁵ Resultant increases in learners' sociocultural awareness may then become entry points for reflective analyses about transcultural communication, frames of reference, and the influence of cumulative experience on language and culture. In sum, learners should be encouraged to engage in two aspects: doing things and thinking about the things they are doing. Through this type of active learning, they can improve their language performance as well as enhance their critical thinking skills.

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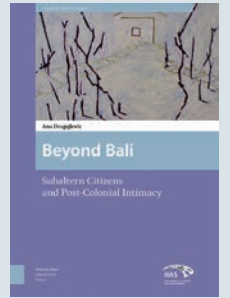
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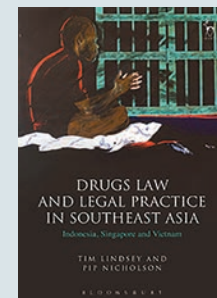
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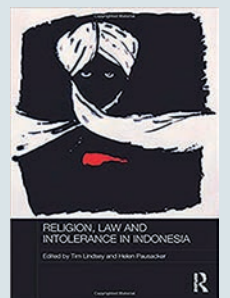
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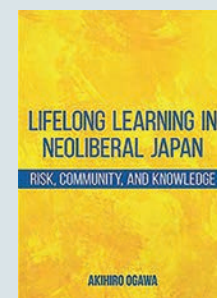
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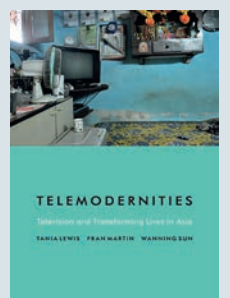
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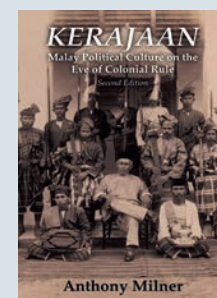
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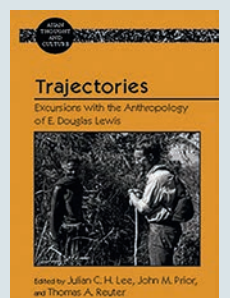
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