

Intercultural Language Activities (with CD-ROM), by John Corbett / Edited by Cambridge University Press, 2010, 262 pp., £23.40 (paperback), ISBN 9780521741880

The last twenty years have seen the production of a rich theoretical literature arguing for the integration of an intercultural dimension within language teaching. Key works of influential authors like Byram (1997) have played a crucial role in articulating this case and Corbett's previous book (2003) reinforces that case. Few works, however, have appeared providing a significant range of immediately usable materials for intercultural language teaching and this has made it harder for many practising language teachers to get started on building an intercultural dimension into their lessons.

Corbett's most recent book recognises this gap and many language teachers interested in introducing an intercultural dimension, but lacking the time to absorb theoretical literature or to spend time on materials design, will benefit significantly from the teaching resources it contains.

The book belongs unequivocally to a genre many language teachers are very familiar with - it is a Teachers' Resource Book. Following a short introduction giving an accessible theoretical framework, the author chooses thirteen topic areas for each of which he provides a range of worksheets, mini-lesson plans and carefully described activity sequences aimed at the development of Intercultural Competence within language lessons. The worksheets are reproduced in small format within the book, but the CD-ROM contains PDF versions of high visual quality which can be photocopied or projected for classroom use. The first chapter entitled 'Setting up an Online Community', in addition, explains in very easy steps how the individual students in a whole class can be paired with individual students in a class in another country. The book concludes with a highly accessible annotated bibliography containing 'classics' of the more theoretical literature.

The topics are impressively wide-ranging, from those common at elementary level like food and domestic life to those frequently included at higher levels like religion and politics. There are also topics having an explicitly intercultural turn like 'Mediations' and 'Interpretations'. Furthermore, the author makes it clear how activities can be adapted to suit different levels thereby allaying fears that Intercultural Competence can only be developed at intermediate and advanced levels.

More concretely, the chapter on childhood, for example, contains a series of activities under the heading 'Classrooms from culture to culture' (pp. 151-155). For one of these, the mini-lesson plan specifies the focus as 'Describing, contrasting and evaluating physical space'. There are then three worksheets – one has photographs of contrasting classrooms from across the world, another gives students headings under which to compare them, and a third gives students a model of how to compare and evaluate them in writing. The book explains in simple steps how each stage of the activity is to proceed and concludes with suggestions on how to adapt the activities for 'lower-level learners'. This formula, appropriately adapted, is followed for all activities within the book.

Overall, in my view, the book is an enormous success. Author and publisher have thought very carefully about where matters currently stand concerning the introduction of an intercultural dimension into language teaching. Their primary target is, rightly, practising teachers and their primary aim seems to be to facilitate the day-to-day integration of intercultural strands into foreign language teaching. From these angles, the book is brilliantly conceived. The format will be familiar and unthreatening to many language teachers and the book is exceptionally easy to use. One feels the steady hand of an experienced and capable

language teacher and that the activities are tried and tested. They are also highly structured, engaging and, in most cases, student-centred.

Many activities involve stimulating ethnographic observation; both of one's culture of origin and of other cultures, and structured comparisons and evaluations are often built in. At the same time the author is acutely aware of the potential delicacy of intercultural encounters and often includes advice on how the learning environment can be made to feel safe.

The book appears mainly to be targeted at students learning English as a foreign language in relatively monocultural contexts, although, sometimes frustratingly, this is not always made clear. Language teachers are, however, in general, highly skilled at adapting teaching materials and I would expect them to adapt many of Corbett's activities very comfortably to the teaching of other languages, to different types of learners and to different levels. Moreover, where teachers are not comfortable with some of the learning aims, the topic areas or the intercultural pedagogy, they may still take inspiration from the activities, reworking them more fully to their own sense of what is fit.

Set against these considerable strengths, the reservations I have are minor. But I would say that, in my view, the learning outcomes tend to be somewhat too vague, that they concentrate overly on basic intercultural development and that the pedagogy puts too much emphasis on implicit rather than explicit intercultural learning. Let us examine these related issues more closely.

Corbett's learning outcomes are not always easy to extract clearly from his mini-lesson plans, but what does emerge tends to be general - e.g. students will in the relevant intercultural contexts 'observe', 'compare', 'contrast' or 'evaluate' and sometimes 'think critically about' - and the same terms tend to recur, largely unrefined, in the instructions for students. The intercultural learning is then expected to happen through students comparing, evaluating etc. specific aspects of culture. Mostly, however, there is no specification as to how they should compare, evaluate and so on. On occasions Corbett adds that students should do so 'critically', but it is not spelled out what doing so critically involves.

Pedagogically speaking, intercultural learning, as presented in this book, occurs via intercultural tasks. In many cases these tasks create contexts in which students focus on an aspect of culture which they observe or compare *not* on some small, specific component of Intercultural Competence. The acquisition of Intercultural Competence thus occurs without being the explicit focus of the task. There are parallels here with the way in which language is acquired when following the principles of Task-Based Learning (Willis, 2000). There too what is to be acquired is not the explicit focus of the task, although what has been acquired is, on most versions of this methodology, something to be reinforced by being made explicit following the task. Corbett's intercultural language activities, in contrast, often do not include this final explicit learning phase.

What intercultural learning might take place in this way? Students may well become more aware of cultural features of the societies with which they are most familiar and more aware of cultural difference, and this may lead them to start to 'relativise' what is to them culturally 'second-nature'. But how far this will lead them to develop any more specific or higher level intercultural skills is, I think, less certain.

Intercultural Competence, in the theoretical literature (e.g. Byram 1997 pp.62-3), is typically broken down into small teachable components or learning outcomes. It is detailed *how* one should compare or evaluate if one is to show intercultural competence in doing so. One needs to do so, for example, acknowledging the complex cultural subjectivity of one's own reactions, a zone which Corbett's activities do not explicitly force students to examine. Once more precise intercultural learning outcomes are built into activities, students are obliged to take note of them and to try to develop them consciously. This is, in a sense, more

explicit intercultural learning and can, I would argue, allow students to develop their intercultural abilities to higher and more refined levels.

All of this is a question of balance – basic versus more advanced, implicit versus explicit, intercultural learning and readers of Corbett's book will differ in their reactions. But they will not, I believe, have difficulties in adapting his activities for more explicit, specifically focused, higher level, intercultural learning if they think this is preferable.

Corbett's book has, to sum up, many merits. Most importantly, the ease and relevance of its format plus the immediate usability of its activities and worksheets will get many language teachers launched on the process of embedding an intercultural dimension in their teaching. The importance of this cannot be under-estimated. At the same time, I hope his book will encourage people to revisit theoretical debates about the nature of Intercultural Competence and of intercultural learning. For example, has what constitutes comparing and evaluating cultures to a high intercultural standard ever been sufficiently clearly articulated? And have discussions about which methodologies best promote intercultural learning in language classrooms gone sufficiently deep? Whatever the answers may be, this book represents a major step forward.

References

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