

Intercultural Competence in Young Language Learners: a case study

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

- I. this thesis comprises only my original work towards the Doctor of Education Degree
- II. due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used
- III. the thesis does not exceed the word length for this degree.
- IV. no part of this work has been used for the award of another degree.
- V. this thesis meets the *University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) requirements for the conduct of research.*

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Abstract

With the heightened profile of language learning in a global community, language education is exploring a new model of intercultural language learning. The goal of intercultural language learning is to produce language users equipped with explicit skills in understanding connections and differences between their own culture and the culture of the target language. The research literature suggests that language learners' resulting intercultural competence will encompass a range of characteristics. There have been few empirical studies, however, to provide illustration of intercultural competence, in order to assist teachers' understanding of desired outcomes and student development.

This case study investigates the characteristics of intercultural competence in young language learners in one Australian primary school. The learners have been engaged in an immersion language program for up to eight years, in one of three languages: French, German or Japanese. The study also investigates the behaviours and understandings in their language teachers which may facilitate the development of learners' intercultural competence. It explores in summary what may be the nature of intercultural competence in the case study language learners. The study is relevant to research of both intercultural language learning and of immersion language classrooms.

Using a case study design, the study incorporates qualitative data in the form of student focus group interviews, teacher interviews, and classroom observations. Data were collected at the case study school, in Sydney, Australia, over a school semester, and involved 49 Year 6 students and four teachers.

Results of the study suggest a number of indicators of the case study students' development in intercultural competence – that is, through understanding of language culture and identity. The student is and sees him or herself as a purposeful interactive communicator. The student understands the target language itself to be the vehicle of the target culture, and often displays metalinguistic curiosity and skills. Some students are able to critically reflect on their (multiple) linguistic and cultural memberships, and to negotiate their identity as a non-native language user.

The study found that teachers provide a model of interculturality to their students. The

teachers' interculturality is enacted in their relationships and pedagogical choices, in their design of experiential learning tasks, and their facilitation of linguistic and cultural connections for their students. The study also found that the nature of the immersion language classroom itself facilitates intercultural competence in students.

The study provides a case study illustration of intercultural competence in language learners which is relevant to research in intercultural language learning, immersion pedagogy and the emerging related pedagogy of content-based language learning.

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