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Angela Scarino et Michelle Kohler

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Angela Scarino et Michelle Kohler

Setting the scene : the situated nature of language learning

- 1 In offering comments as we engage in an effort to reconceptualise the nature, goals and outcomes of the learning of additional languages, we foreground our own *situatedness* in Australia, working as researchers, curriculum and assessment developers, and teacher educators in languages education in Australian education. We see Australia itself as connected in a global, networked world and as a multilingual and multicultural society with its distinctive configuration of languages. This distinctive configuration encompasses the languages and cultures of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first people of the land, English as the dominant national language, a range of languages that have come from various cycles of migration (predominantly from the UK and Europe initially and increasingly from the Asian regions in more recent times).
- 2 We offer this description in order firstly, to give a sense of where we are coming from in our own thinking. Secondly, we wish to foreground that languages education in Australia is poised between its distinctive history and geography ; its indigenous history (with the marked reality of many Aboriginal languages having been lost or endangered) and migration history (linked to the UK, Europe and Asia) on the one hand, and its geography and history in the Asian region, on the other hand. Thirdly, we highlight that just as is the case for Australia, all language learning is set in the context of its particular local, social, cultural, historical, geographical, political landscape, which, in turn, shapes the status and positioning of languages learning in general and of specific languages in particular ; this context also influences the personal desires,

affiliations and the relationship that individuals have with the languages being learnt. In Australia, as in environments elsewhere, there is a need to recognise the reality of immense diversity in the contexts in which the languages being learnt reside. There is a distinctive, local configuration of languages as well as a distinctive and dynamic place that each of the languages holds in the societal and educational history of the particular context and this in turn gives meaning to the learning of particular languages that takes place. For example, a wide range of languages are offered, notably some 60 languages are officially assessed at Year 12 level which marks the end of the secondary cycle in Australia in efforts to ensure that many of the languages in the Australian ecology are made available for learning. Equally, there is a pressing need to consider the force of globalisation and the world perspective that it invites, as well as its impact on local practices.

Expanding goals and language learning

- 3 Given the reality of globalisation and diverse local social, linguistic, cultural, historical, educational realities it becomes necessary to expand the goals of additional language education in all its humanistic, political, economic and professional dimensions. The communicative language learning legacy, which has characterised language learning for the past four decades, offers an insufficient conceptualisation of goals for contemporary times. In the latter conceptualisation, goals are primarily expressed in functionalist, instrumental, transactional terms, whereas what is needed are goals that foreground interaction that is most likely to be interlinguistic and intercultural and that advances personal, aesthetic, and educative goals. (See Kramsch 2014 ; Leung and Scarino 2016 ; McNamara 2019). The exchanges that occur in interaction can no longer simply be understood as transactions at the level of information, but rather they are exchanges in the negotiation of symbolic meanings (Kramsch and Whiteside, 2008), building relationships and expressing acts of identity. That is to say, meanings are not a given but are a co-construction that rely on reciprocal interpretation and creation of meanings in situ. This means then that learners are not just performers in the sense of doing or acting out communication but that for learners, communication within and across languages and cultures becomes a project both of mediation and understanding the mediating role of language and culture.
- 4 In this way, through language learning, learners begin to develop sophisticated ways of participating in and understanding communication in diversity. They come to understand the exchange of meanings as effortful and ethical as it involves exchange across diverse linguistic, cultural and knowledge frameworks, as a process that is complex and at times also conflictual. They also come to see the exchange of meanings as uncertain for the process is necessarily interpretive. This intellectual work entails learning at a meta level as learners are invited to reflect on the phenomena exchanged in communication and, through reflexivity, to consider themselves in relation to others as interlinguistic and intercultural mediators and communicators.
- 5 A traditional framing of the goals of language learning cannot do justice, neither to the phenomenon of communication as described, nor the diversity of languages and cultures and the diversity of learner needs, desires, prior experiences and affiliations in relation to the particular language being learnt.

The construct : conceptualising language learning and its assessment

- 6 The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) is a resource designed originally to support language learning in the context of a diverse Europe. It presents a conceptualisation of the goals of language learning in generalised, generic, functional terms, oriented towards global mobility and the preparation of mobile workers and travellers. It was a project that sought to capture commonalities across contexts, languages and learners – common goals and common achievements captured in a common scale to be used as a common reference point or set of standards for considering learner achievements. Its use has expanded to contexts well beyond Europe, reaching social, linguistic, cultural, historical and political contexts that are markedly different from the reality of Europe, each with their own distinctive histories, geographies and configurations of languages being learnt. This desire to capture commonality runs counter to the diversity of language learning in diverse contexts. There is an assumption that all languages are alike, that all additional language learning is alike, and that there is one proficiency in common across all languages, contexts of use, and learners.
- 7 The construct, that is the driving force of the Framework and of official language learning, is conceived as communicative or plurilingual competence, but in what is now a traditional understanding of language use, rather than as language use with meta-awareness and with personal meaningfulness and self-awareness as indicated above. The construct is further operationalised in the scales (proficiency descriptions) and it is the scales that are the most influential part of the CEFR when it is applied in diverse contexts. The scales depict hypothesised norms of proficiency that are assumed to be common for all languages, contexts and learners. It is also assumed that functional equivalence can be established. These norms, however, cannot do justice to the ways in which people, in diversity, mediate the exchange of meanings. They are, as such, necessarily reductive and elide the individual and his/her own personal goals and desires vis à vis additional language learning.
- 8 By way of contrast in Australia with the recent development and release of the Australian Curriculum for Languages (see the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority), the curriculum development has been language specific for the first time in the history of languages education in Australia. There are now nationally developed language specific curricula for 16 languages, a Framework for Aboriginal Languages, intended to be realised in specific languages, a Framework for Classical Languages that recognises Classical Greek, Latin and Hebrew, and a curriculum for Auslan (that is Australian sign language). Although the distinctiveness of particular languages is only one dimension of the diversity of additional language learning, it is a step towards working with the diversity of communities and the field. Further steps would see an effort towards moving away from scales and common standards towards seeking to profile the complex capabilities that learners need to perform and reflect upon in mediating communication in diversity.
- 9 The conceptualisation of the construct in language learning needs to go beyond traditional notions of communicative and plurilingual competence, understood as common and universal across all languages, contexts and learners. The local and

individual meaning and meaningfulness of learning additional languages cannot be diminished.

- 10 Questions then arise as to whether communication itself, particularly in the context of the complex diversity of contemporary times is a matter of social conformity in relation to established conventions and norms or a matter of personal expression and creativity? How do we best recognise the complex act of communicating when participants in the act are not members of the same community, and when in fact this communication extends well beyond European/ 'western' conventions and norms? And in curriculum and assessment terms what is the value of establishing commonalities across languages, cultures, contexts and learners? At what point does standardisation and European/international referencing become counter-productive and cease to have meaning for specific contexts? Whose agenda is being enacted and what do learners themselves have to gain?

AUTEURS

ANGELA SCARINO

Research Centre for Languages and Cultures, University of South Australia

Angela Scarino is Associate Professor in Applied Linguistics and Director of the Research Centre for Languages and Cultures, at the University of South Australia. Her research expertise is in languages education in linguistically and culturally diverse societies, second language learning within an intercultural orientation, learning-oriented assessment and second language teacher education. She has been a Chief Investigator on a range of research grants. She has worked in diverse contexts beyond Australia, including Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, France and New Zealand.

angela.scarino[at]unisa.edu.au

MICHELLE KOHLER

Research Centre for Languages and Cultures, University of South Australia

Dr Michelle Kohler is Senior Lecturer at the Research Centre for Languages and Cultures, University of South Australia. Her research expertise is in languages education policy and planning, intercultural language teaching and learning, mediation, and curriculum and assessment design. Michelle is currently the President of the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia.

Michelle.Kohler[at]unisa.edu.au