

Introduction

This book is based on a classroom study exploring a particular intercultural approach to language teaching at university aiming to develop students into critical intercultural language users. I call my approach the ‘cultuurtekst’ - text as culture – approach, a term which I have borrowed from the Dutch literary critic, Maaïke Meijer (1986). I had conceived of this approach as a result of reflections on my previous teaching, students’ engagements and the newly developing theoretical area of intercultural communication in language and culture pedagogy.

In this book I am mapping the territory of language teaching at university and coining new concepts on the way. As the study took me over 10 years to complete – with various interruptions along the way, it represents a professional journey as a lecturer of Dutch at one of Britain’s traditional universities at a time when ideas about language and culture pedagogy were developing fast. This has not been an easy professional journey; the pedagogy which I was developing at times met with resistance among the students and ran counter to language teaching approaches employed by colleagues at the institution where I worked. Moreover the data I collected, consisting of transcripts of my classes in which we discussed a particular text and interviews with students, were marred by ambiguities and if anything, seemed to point to a failure of my approach.

My initial conclusion therefore was that intercultural communication is infinitely more complex than a ‘cultuurtekst’ approach, or perhaps any other particular method of language teaching, can effect. Secondly, that attempting to develop students’ critical awareness and language competence would need an even clearer conceptualisation coupled with a more considered pedagogical approach.

Some years later – and this is where conducting this study over a longer period of time than initially anticipated has produced unexpected benefits - I looked at the data again. This time I looked at the data from an ethnographic perspective, and not with the idea in mind of how ‘successful’ the approach had been. Instead, I focused on what happened in the classroom, how the students engaged with the text and one another and what the significant dialogic moments in class had been. Something interesting emerged. In the earlier interpretation I had seen students’ interpretations of the text based on personal experience as a weakness; students had failed to analyse the text using the language of analysis based on concepts of culture and representation. Instead, it emerged that it was precisely the moments where students brought their personal experience and interpretation to bear upon the text that the most dialogic and intercultural moments occurred. These were the moments when students applied their ‘self’ to the text, where they tried to respond to the text and explain it to others - the moments when students were ‘struggling for meaning’. As a result, I coined the phrase ‘being a text ethnographer’ to account for the way that students can engage critically and reflexively with a text from an ‘inside’ as well as an ‘outside’ perspective.

The study itself and the development of my approach was born out of dissatisfaction with existing instrumental approaches in language teaching which were – and indeed still are - prevalent in existing language materials and in many discourses surrounding language learning in general and in the field of Dutch language teaching in particular. Yet, I worked in a context - that of a Modern Language Degree at one of Britain’s traditional universities, where to a large extent traditional discourses about language learning were dominant. As a result there was a general assumption at the institution where I worked, that language teaching was synonymous with the grammar-translation approach, and language classes were strictly separated from the ‘content’ classes addressing ‘culture’, which was generally conceptualised as ‘literature’, or – occasionally - as ‘film’. The generally accepted aim of language learning was, and in some cases may still be, that of reaching ‘near-native speaker’ competence.

The tensions and conflicting pulls between these almost opposing forces and discourses within language learning form the background to this study. In chapter 1 I argue that neither paradigm in language education, i.e. the ‘traditional’ liberal humanist on the one hand and the instrumentalist on the other, can provide a satisfactory framework for language teaching in the context of a Modern Languages degree; a context, in which students are prepared linguistically, culturally and personally for the complex lives in an era of mobilities. Whilst neither paradigm is sufficient in its own right, I argue that one of the aspects of the liberal humanist paradigm, which is worth rearticulating for language learning, is its focus on criticality and intellectual engagement. However, the notion of criticality provided by that paradigm, the idea of taking critical distance to gain objectivity, provides a limited view of criticality. I point to

Pennycook's (2001) notion of 'mapping discourses' as an alternative view on critique to be taken in the language classroom.

In chapter 2 I further discuss the conflicting perspectives on the concepts of culture and of language that are often assumed in language learning at university. In discussing the relationship between these two I point to the dilemma language teachers face when wishing to emphasise complexity and transnational perspectives, whilst at the same time being charged with looking at the particularities of the language and culture being studied. I conceived of the latter as 'national articulations' in globalised discourses.

Chapter 3 focuses on the notion of intercultural communication and discusses three different approaches in language education: those of Kramsch, Byram and Guilherme. In discussing these approaches in relation to the framework of criticality and complexity set out earlier, I set out where and how I build on particular aspects within each of these approaches, including Blommaert's argument for 'boundary crossing' in intercultural communication. Following Phipps and Gonzalez's (2004) view on 'being intercultural', I explain how the notion of 'cultuurtekst' provides a way of being intercultural and being ethnographic when reading texts.

Chapter 4 forms a bridge between the theoretical chapters and the discussion of the data. Here I set out the context of my study, the conceptual framework of my 'cultuurtekst' approach based on a pedagogy of heteroglossia and multiple discourses, the syllabus of the fourth year language class in which I adopted this approach, and the methodology of my study.

Chapter 5 looks at the data from two lessons out of the yearlong language course. In these lessons we discussed a particular text from *Men's Health*, following the framework for analysis which I created based on the idea of 'cultuurtekst'. During the first lesson, we discussed the text at a 'textual' or 'product' level, looking at content and argumentation structures following a liberal humanist perspective of critique. During the second class we discussed the text at a 'cultuurtekst' level, creating a dialogic space in which the students started to engage in 'mapping discourses'. In looking at what different ways of reading the two perspectives on text yielded, it emerged that these two levels of text analysis are not easily separated. Even when looking at text at a product level, students 'went beyond' the text and engaged in critiquing the text for its ideological positioning. Equally, looking at the text as 'cultuurtekst' at times became confused with critiquing the text from the liberal humanist perspective, as not constituting a 'good argument'. The second lesson did, however, bring about much richer dialogic moments where students took on occasion an intercultural stance in engaging with the ideas in the text and with one another. The significant findings in these data were particularly how students brought their own experiences and previous knowledge to bear upon the text.

In chapter 6, the concluding chapter, I discuss the general findings of my study and I include interview data to see what approaches to text students had

taken and to what extent they had used critical perspectives. I focus on two students in this chapter: Claire, who engaged readily with my 'cultuurtekst' approach and Sarah, who resisted it throughout the year. Whilst it might have been tempting to classify Claire as the 'successful' language learner, as she was reading 'with her eyes very open', as she said in one of her interviews, it was in fact Sarah who made the biggest transformation as a learner, as she had to adapt her view of communication and language as a whole. She also provided me with insights into how prior views of communication that students hold affect their learning in class. Moreover, the interviews also showed that the rich moments and understanding of discursive mapping which had occurred during the class, were not necessarily transferred in their reflections on the course as a whole.

In this final chapter I also examine the tensions brought about by working with conflicting views of text, criticality and education embodied in a pedagogy which aims to emphasise cultural complexity on the one hand and cultural particularities, through the notion of 'Dutch articulations', on the other. I conclude that these seeming incompatibilities are part of the every day realities of students anyway and I argue for positively embracing these tensions. A greater level of explicitness about the theoretical assumptions underlying language and culture will provide students with the theoretical tools needed to reflect on these tensions. I further point to the importance of engagement with personal experience in the language class. I argue for pedagogies of engagement rather than the purely rational and analytical. These are pedagogies where students can explore their own relations and sense of belongings in our globalised, complex and cosmopolitan societies.

Whilst this study looks particularly at reading texts, it is set within the context of a general language class and my proposals for future pedagogies assume reading is embedded in the interrelated network of other activities that take place in class.

It is through the self-examination aspect of my study - looking critically at my own practice - that new theoretical understandings emerged. However uncomfortable these self-examinations are, this book is implicitly also an argument for a pedagogy which not only encourages the learner to engage in self-reflexive activities, but conversely for the teacher to do the same.