

Critical Issues in Interculturality for Young Language Learners

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Abstract: This study critically addresses key issues related to interculturality among young language learners, focusing on an international primary school in Shenzhen, China. Interculturality is framed from a non-essentialist perspective, emphasizing the dynamic and reciprocal negotiation of meaning between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. The research explores how intercultural understanding can be cultivated through interactive pedagogical strategies such as storytelling and storycrafting, which facilitate both language learning and cultural exchange. The study highlights the unique characteristics of young learners, noting that their innate curiosity and active engagement make them well-suited to these approaches. Additionally, it examines the practical challenges of integrating intercultural encounters into language education, including the need for specialized teacher training and the complexity of managing diverse linguistic backgrounds. The study concludes that fostering interculturality in young learners requires a shift from traditional cultural instruction to engaging students in authentic, interactive experiences. These approaches not only enhance language acquisition but also promote deeper intercultural understanding and prepare students for global citizenship.

Keywords: Interculturality; Young Learners; Language Education; Storytelling; Non-Essentialism

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1. Introduction

In the post-pandemic world economic, linguistic, and intercultural interactions have recommenced. In such circumstances, the need for related skills is increasing, particularly among the young (Nelson & Luetz, 2021). The latter are the focus of the present study, which outlines the various debates surrounding interculturality and young language learners, definitions of interculturality, the characteristics of young learners, intercultural educational objectives, and pedagogical strategies. The implications for enhancing English language education and interculturality at an international primary school in Shenzhen, China are then considered.

2. Debates on Issues of Interculturality for Young Learners

In the present study, interculturality is defined as the ongoing critical negotiation and co-construction of meaning between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, mainly focusing on the non-essentialist perspective that can reduce differentialist bias (Simpson & Dervin, 2019). The above definition is, however, only one of many (Dietz, 2018). The essentialist view highlights the unchangeable nature of differences between social groups (Chao & Kung, 2014). Interculturality can be used to refer to fixed disparities and comparisons between cultures or a form of cultural adaptation and shifts^[1]; for example, interlocutors might change their language or behaviours in accordance with those with whom they are communicating (Kim, 2017). Non-essentialists, who highlight the dynamic nature of culture (Nathan, 2015), challenge the essentialist point of interculturality, arguing that an over-emphasis on cultural differences can lead to stereotyping and exclusivity (Simpson & Dervin, 2019). They propose that interculturality encompasses reciprocal and reflexive interactions with people from different communities (Dervin, 2016). Moreover, negotiations between the self and others are constant and concurrently external with the latter and internal within the former, with both influencing ways of thinking and behaviours (Dervin & Simpson, 2021)^[2]. Researchers influenced primarily by Western ideologies have suggested that interculturality is a co-constructed phenomenon created through mutual and critical negotiation between individuals from different cultural groups (Dervin & Simpson, 2021; Zhou & Pilcher, 2019).

The characteristics of young learners are integral to intercultural education discussions. Nunan (2016) defined young learners as primary (5-to-12-year-old) school pupils or, in broader contexts, those whose ages range from the foetal stage to young adulthood. Young learners have also been characterised as active participants in the learning process, whose innate curiosity

and propensity for exploration drive their engagement with the educational environment, facilitating cognitive development (Bjorklund, 2023). This interaction may not always be a smooth one, as Babakr et al. (2019) noted. Young learners may struggle with abstract concepts and find it difficult to concentrate for sustained periods because of their limited cognitive development. Consequently, pedagogical strategies must be designed that cater to their developmental needs by prioritising interactive and engaging activities over passive instruction, for example, by allowing them to participate actively in real-life situations. What is more, these are more likely to appeal to them and conduce to understanding (Groccia, 2018)^[3-6].

The cultivation of intercultural understanding is now a prime educational objective (Pinter, 2017), and has been the subject of both general and critical debate (McCandless et al., 2022). Generally, intercultural understanding might be regarded as an open mindset that embraces diverse perspectives, perceives difference as an opportunity, and encourages the creation of a fairer world (Short et al., 2016). Acevedo (2019) classified intercultural understanding into three categories: knowledge, perspective, and action. Knowledge refers to the domestic and global information children obtain about themselves and those surrounding them physically (e.g., through literature that integrates international languages; Byram, 2021). Although to some extent this knowledge is a useful way for children to acquire new vocabulary (Acevedo, 2019)^[7], it is superficial because it does not take into account the deeper thinking of others and issues (Short et al., 2016). Also, such knowledge privileges static cultural characteristics and outcomes, leading to stereotyping (McCandless et al., 2022), thereby falling into an essentialist trap. Nevertheless, children can sometimes be aware that their own opinions are distinct from but in some respects connected with those of others (Acevedo, 2019) - an argument that stresses the need for students to integrate their own and others' thinking. This enables them to grasp the complexities of global issues, empathise with individuals from different cultural backgrounds^[8-9], reflect on the values and beliefs that underpin their actions and those of others around them, and evolve in their communications and relationships (Acevedo, 2019; Short et al., 2016).

Meanwhile, combining perspective and action engenders a more critical view of intercultural communication because the synergistic effect allows for a better understanding of cultural components (e.g., ideas, values, and beliefs; Corapi, 2014); stimulates curiosity about one's culture^[10-13]; leads to a better knowledge of other cultures; and encourages children to learn as global citizens (Corapi & Short, 2015). Finally, critical views of intercultural understanding can align with non-essentialism because both stress the dynamic interactions that take place at a deeper level within cultures.

Intercultural language education has evolved from teaching about culture to learning through intercultural encounters (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019), which has shifted its philosophical foundations from essentialism to a more non-essentialist perspective. Teaching about culture introduces learners to topics such as food, flags, and festivals (Alvaré, 2017). For example, in foreign language education, establishing intercultural understanding ordinarily involves focusing on learning about a country where a particular language is spoken and learning how to talk, think, and act like a native speaker (Cushner, 2015)^[14-18]. Cushner (2015) argued that this instruction method was insufficient because intercultural understanding must go beyond the cognitive sphere and encourage new (and more productive) behaviours. Language teachers must give students opportunities to interact first-hand with individuals from other societies and cultures, thus acquiring the capacity to trust and understand them, as well as cultivating the skills required to communicate successfully (Cushner, 2015). Pedagogies based on encounters meet these requirements. In this context, the term encounters refers to conversational situations in which one makes a sincere effort to comprehend someone else's viewpoint (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019). For instance, rather than simply exchanging superficial cultural information, children can convey their thinking, emotions, and communication styles (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2021). Jaatinen (2015) explained that encounter guidance means learning through real-life experience, which requires language teachers to provide children with a safe and relaxing context in which they can be encouraged to play, discover, and discuss with each other. An example of this might be the exchange of stories, where children can talk about their lives and discuss their experiences and feelings.

3.Context

The immediate context of the present study is a Year 4 English classroom at an international elementary school in Shenzhen, China. The students are aged around 10 years, and can therefore be considered young learners (Nunan, 2016)^[19]. Shenzhen is a socially and economically advanced city, and people from around the world come there to work. Some enrol their children in international schools. In the present case, students come from a range of cultural communities (either in terms of nationality, language, interest, or a combination thereof), creating opportunities for intercultural communication, but they share a linguistic repertoire comprising English and Mandarin. For the majority, English is a second language, but some are native English

speakers, and the primary language of instruction at the school is English.

4. Implications

For the school's Year 4 students, intercultural encountering in English classroom may be more appropriate (and appealing), given their characteristics (Piipponen, 2023). First, since young learners are more interested in interactive instruction (Groccia, 2018), intercultural encounters have been adopted as the most effective approach. For example, the students engage in dialogue with each other (i.e., with students from different cultural backgrounds)^[20]. This facilitates intercultural understanding, enabling the students to talk about their daily life experiences in a more lively and relaxed way than just learning about other cultures (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019).

As was touched on above, in terms of designing engagement activities, storytelling can play an important role in developing children's English learning and intercultural understanding (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019). Jaatinen's (2015) Finnish study showed that although some children may have weaker English skills, they can still be encouraged and motivated by teachers to use English to tell their stories and share their cultures. Storytelling could serve as a conduit for intercultural dissemination in Shenzhen also, enabling Year 4 students to learn about and appreciate diverse cultural perspectives. For example, the English teachers might encourage them to relay stories about their families^[21-25]. By doing so, these young learners would not only enhance their language skills but also deepen their understanding of family culture in different communities.

Storycrafting is a specific method by which children can engage in intercultural communication (Backman-Nord et al., 2023). Unlike storytelling, storycrafting is based on the notion that children are creators of cultures (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2021). It allows children to weave narratives around specific topics, while teachers meticulously transcribe their stories using the children's own words and sentences, ensuring that interruptions to their storytelling flow is minimised. A new shared narrative culture is thereby created (Backman-Nord et al., 2023). Piipponen et al. (2024) demonstrated the transformative potential of storycrafting, emphasising its role in amplifying children's voices by allowing them to use their own languages and fostering intercultural exchange in a relaxed atmosphere. By empowering children as the creators and conveyors of culture, storycrafting facilitates the emergence of new cultural narratives and promotes intercultural communication, especially in extracurricular contexts (Piipponen, 2023). English teachers at the school in Shenzhen could incorporate storycrafting into daily conversations or afterschool activities by providing students with themes they could use to create stories based on their communities. For example, they could tell stories relating to festivals in English, Chinese, and so on, drawing from their own cultures and building a unique new culture. By using their own languages and talking about their own families, they are likely to be more confident when sharing their experiences^[26-27]. More generally, this will contribute to the development of intercultural understanding and improved global communication (Piipponen, 2023).

Such an approach has several limitations, however. Firstly, intercultural encounter pedagogies demand a high level of skill (Figueredo-Canosa et al., 2020). Not all of the English teachers at the present school have had any relevant training in this emergent approach. Consequently, they are not fully familiar with or supportive of storytelling and storycrafting^[28], teaching about the cultures of English-speaking countries based on their previous pedagogical experience and falling prey to the essentialist view of intercultural education (Alvaré, 2017). Additionally, since storycrafting requires English teachers to transcribe the students' own words (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019), difficulties may arise because of their diverse linguistic backgrounds. Not all teachers will be equipped to deal with this, so difficulties in accurately recording and contextualising the students' stories (which will be conveyed in the mother tongue) are likely to arise.

5. Conclusion

The present study has addressed various issues concerning interculturality and its significance for young language learners in the context of an international primary school in Shenzhen, China. By adopting a non-essentialist perspective, the dynamic nature of cultural interactions and the importance of reciprocal engagement in fostering intercultural understanding has been highlighted. The principal characteristics of young learners, who are active participants in the learning process driven by curiosity and exploration, have been shown to aid in intercultural understanding and the development of new pedagogical strategies. Intercultural understanding is now a key objective in language education for young learners, encompassing knowledge at a general level and perspective and action at a critical level. While traditional approaches focus on teaching about culture, contemporary pedagogies emphasise learning through intercultural encounters, promoting active engagement and authentic communication. In the context of a Year 4 English classroom in Shenzhen, the shared linguistic repertoires of English

and Mandarin provide a foundation for intercultural communication amongst students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Intercultural encountering pedagogies, such as storytelling and storycrafting^[29], can be effective tools for promoting intercultural exchange and understanding. There are significant challenges in implementing these methods, however, including the need for specialist training for educators and difficulties in documenting students' stories in multiple languages.

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