

Intercultural Language Education—from Curriculum to Classroom

Workshop by John Corbett, *University of Glasgow*

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The workshop on “Intercultural language education—from Curriculum to Classroom” by Professor John Corbett of the University of Glasgow was held on 2 February 2007, from 10am to 4pm. It was held at the Singapore Polytechnic Guild House and attended by 34 participants from various tertiary institutions in Singapore. The workshop attempted to bridge the gap between theoretical issues in intercultural language education and its operationalization in real classroom situations.

After STETS President Roland Davies finished his introduction, Professor Corbett started with a brief discussion of some relevant information from *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* which has served as the impetus for an intercultural approach to English language education. According to him, the European framework’s recognition of the importance of intercultural communication has resulted in a radical shift in curricular goals in language education: from ‘native speaker’ to ‘cultural explorer’, ‘cultural negotiator’, and ‘cultural mediator’.

Together with the participants, Professor Corbett then talked about various common understandings of ‘culture’ (e.g., identities, values, behaviours), explaining that culture is a negotiated and ‘ordinary’ phenomenon. That is, culture is practised everyday and manifests itself in all forms and practices of daily life.

Professor Corbett then presented several theoretical or conceptual considerations in intercultural language education by drawing on Professor Mike Bryam’s ‘five *savoirs* [knowledges] of intercultural communicative competence (ICC)’. These mainly refer to particular types of knowledge which define or constitute ICC:

1. Knowledge of *self* and *other*; of how interaction occurs; of the relationship of the individual to society.
2. Knowing how to *interpret* and *relate* information.
3. Knowing how to engage with *political consequences* of education; being *critically aware* of cultural behaviours.
4. Knowing how to *discover* cultural information.
5. Knowing how to be: how to *relativise* oneself and *value* the attitudes and beliefs of others.

The rest of the workshop was then devoted to discussing and evaluating classroom activities which show how the *savoirs* can be taught and learned. Professor Corbett provided various kinds of everyday examples of communication from Singapore and other parts of the world: for example, political billboards, commercial advertisements, literary texts, academic online conversations, English language corpora, recorded

conversations between parents and children and between ‘gossiping’ individuals. According to Professor Corbett, these texts as used in classroom activities with the purpose of learning English would develop the learners’ intercultural communicative competence. Visual and verbal literacies, naming conventions, the roles of languages in society and negotiations in virtual learning environments are some sources of intercultural issues.

Towards the end of the workshop, some participants asked questions about particular aspects of intercultural language education. Some issues emerged, including the politics of ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’ in the choice of what language/textual data can or cannot be included in materials preparation. Using everyday data which are admittedly rich in intercultural information is not a straightforward affair: the community of learners and users may accept or reject such data based on their own beliefs and needs.

The implications of intercultural language education on assessment were also briefly tackled. Professor Corbett admitted that language evaluation and testing are complex matters indeed. He nevertheless provided a few suggestions on how ICC could be assessed through portfolios and other ‘traditional’ forms of assessment.

The strength of the workshop was its ability to relate theoretical issues to practical concerns in the classroom. Not only did he address the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of intercultural language education, but he also clearly demonstrated the ‘how’ through interesting and thought-provoking materials. It also helped that Professor Corbett is an engaging speaker – he kept participants glued to all discussions through his informal way of presentation.

Copies of his book *An intercultural approach to English language teaching* (2003, reprinted in 2007) were also made available during the workshop, and those who bought a copy had the opportunity to have it signed personally by Professor Corbett. Richard Slessor, former STETS President and the current Chairman of the Special Projects Committee, closed the workshop by thanking both Professor Corbett for his stimulating ideas and the participants for their support and active participation.