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Being a good neighbour: Developing intercultural understanding through critical dialogue between an Australian and Finnish cross-case study

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Abstract

Language educators in Australia and Finland are expected to foster intercultural understanding within foreign language education. This paper presents findings from a qualitative case study focusing on theoretical and practical intercultural understanding in secondary school language education. The data for this study includes lesson observations as well as student and teachers interviews collected in two secondary schools in Australia and Finland. The findings demonstrate the complex resources teachers and students draw on to develop and share intercultural understanding. The discussion addresses the value of different perspectives and the need for a new metaphor to conceptualise intercultural understanding.

Keywords: intercultural understanding; foreign language education, critical intercultural dialogue

Von Sprachlehrern in Australien und Finnland wird erwartet, dass sie interkulturelle Kompetenz fördern, um Beziehungen zwischen kulturellen Identitäten, Kontexten und sozialen Werten aufzubauen. In diesem Beitrag werden die wichtigsten Ergebnisse einer qualitativen Fallstudie sowohl zum theoretischen Verständnis, als auch zur Ausübung interkultureller Kompetenz, von Lehrern und Schülern der Sekundarstufe diskutiert. Die Daten für diese Studie umfassen Beobachtungen des Unterrichts sowie Interviews mit Studenten und Lehrern, die an zwei weiterführenden Schulen in Australien und Finnland gesammelt wurden. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Entwicklung von interkulturellem Verständnis von Lehrern und Schülern eng mit ihrem Sprachgebrauch im Unterricht und im Alltag verbunden ist.

Schlüsselwörter: interkulturelles verständnis; fremdsprachenunterricht, kritischer interkultureller dialog

Introduction

By definition, foreign language education (FLE) involves encounters with 'other' in terms of the target language with new expressions and perspectives, and with regard to 'the others' encountered through the language (Norton, 2016). The 'foreignness' of FLE can delight and discourage students of foreign languages as assumptions and expectations are questioned and the challenge of seeing from different perspectives is acknowledged (Smith & Carvill, 2000). This integral aspect of FLE can be compromised by mercantile and voyeuristic interests that reduce FLE to economic or cultural profit (Borghetti, 2013) and by suggestions that the intercultural is 'increasingly becoming a thing of the past' (Holmes & Dervin, 2016, p. 4). We argue that seeking understanding of someone other can provide a richer view of what it means to be an individual self, to belong to a community and to relate to others as well as other communities (Emerson, 1996; Lanas, 2014). Moreover, we draw on a dialogical conceptualisation of self and other (Hermans, 2001) to highlight the way in which encounters with others fundamentally inform the development of self and culture.

Intercultural understanding offers an opportunity to critically consider what it means to be 'me' in relation to 'you' (singular and/or plural), to express myself, explore and imagine the world through different wor(l)ds. The development of intercultural understanding can be considered a 'poetic experiencing of contradictions in order to invent new modes of subjectivity' (Wang, 2005, p. 59) and a way of being that seeks social justice rather than the unthinking continuation of established assumptions and norms (Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010). This understanding recognises the absence of 'clear-cut answers and easy applications' in intercultural education (Zhou & Pilcher, 2018), a space filled by 'complexities, accepting multiple voices, openness and the questioning of fixed truths' (Lanas, 2014, p. 174); the notion of *inter*cultural cannot exist without acknowledging the *cultural*.

Calls for fresh critical approaches to the fostering of intercultural understanding in language education research (e.g. Jin & Cortazzi, 2012) as well as language education (e.g. Byrnes, 2010, Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, Morgan & Scrimgeour, 2018) remain relevant as globalization and movements of people rapidly change the demographics of communities and classrooms as well as the experiences of teachers and students (Bhabha, 2011, Viebrock, 2018). In both Australia and Finland, the national FLE curriculum aim to foster intercultural understanding as part of language learning. This raises the question, however, as to what kind of intercultural understanding is fostered by teachers and students through pedagogical practices and critical reflections in and around foreign language classrooms. This article reports the findings from a comparative case study with data from teachers and students in secondary school FLE in Finland and Australia. The aim of this study is to generate a cross-case dialogue with the potential to enrich understanding of how intercultural understanding is addressed in these contexts and contribute to critical discussions around the intercultural responsibilities of language educators. We sketch the study's theoretical framework, before introducing the contexts and the empirical background of the study.

Theoretical framework

Cultural selves

The recognition of language learning as a social practice as well as a linguistic system (e.g. Norton, 2016), highlights the critical relationship between self and other. Arguably, the sign system of language is only meaningful if the expression of one is understood by another (Voloshinov, 1973). It is at this critical juncture, however, that the difficult notion of culture enters the scene. If the notion of 'social' recognises understanding between a minimum of two, 'cultures' recognises the way in which meaning(s) can cross time and space, this means that language is meaningful to other people in another time and space because meaning

resides in more than immediate social relationships. This does not suggest that cultures or meanings do not change over time and space (Voloshinov, 1973), but importantly the encoded expressions of shared experiences, memories, associations and assumptions form shared histories and create epistemological landscapes that anticipate future understandings and creative responses (Olsson, 2007). The student of foreign languages enters these landscapes, but the navigation of them is often influenced by the pedagogical pathway provided (Moloney, Lobytsyna, Moate, 2019).

As the epistemological landscape of culture forms communities and identities based on 'theorized experience' (Emerson, 1996) potential difficulties are created. These difficulties include the way in which cultural formation firstly, artificially suggests the formation of truth, rather than an unfolding understanding that continues to change and develop over time (Olsson, 2007); secondly, forms boundaries (encounters) and potential of misunderstandings and exclusions (Bhabha, 2011; Norton, 2016); and, thirdly, creates a space for the loss and/or denial of self (Bakhtin, 1993; Emerson, 1996). Each of these difficulties underlines the way in which the centripetal force of culture (Bakhtin, 1981) can reinforce itself to such a degree that individuals within this culture assume that their way is the only (correct) way and fail to recognise the legitimacy of other cultural understandings. A similar dynamic is perhaps at play when monolinguals struggle to enjoy the cognitive flexibility of bi- and multilinguals (Bialystok, 2016).

It is also these difficulties that underline the importance of *inter*cultural and *intra*cultural understanding. As we encounter the wor(l)ds of others so we can potentially encounter, even enter, different ways of being in the world and cast a critical eye over who we assume ourselves to be (Bakhtin, 1986). Entering a new epistemological landscape requires reorientation of self as unfamiliar expectations, expressions and everyday occurrences become part of one's experience, with possibility of gaining a new perspective.

Culture, however, remains a contentious issue in language education research, for some an 'old and tired concept (Breidenbach & Nyíri, 2009, p. 10). Dervin, et al. (2012) highlight the problematic way attention focuses on 'others' rather than critically engaging with the cultural lenses of the majority and the complexity of intercultural encounters. When cultural boundaries are epistemologically reframed as places of encounter, not separation, a new affordance appears. This place of encounter can be a place of questioning, reflection, reappraisal and enrichment (Smith & Carvill, 2000). These critically reflective, essentially ethical, actions can provide a centrifugal force that counter the centripetal tendency of individuals and cultures to assume that their way is the way. This acknowledges the connectedness of humanity and shows that the way cultures and individuals live is not only a private affair but has profound implications for the lives of others, indeed the historical development of the world (Bakhtin, 1986).

In other words, acknowledging individuals does not undermine the notion of culture but highlights the dynamic nature of life together that is sustained across and through differences as well as interconnectedness. Acknowledging culture does not need to essentialise difference or deny the value of individual experience but recognises '… there is no individual without cultural, personal without social, self without other' (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004, p. 292).

Pedagogical responsibility

A pedagogical challenge for foreign language educators is to bring students into relationship with others through a new language, recognizing that intercultural understanding is necessary, yet not easy as a concept or as a way of life (Lanas, 2014). In the 1990s, pedagogical approaches were promoted to go beyond the limitations of teaching 'visible culture' (such as food and festivals) by exploring 'intercultural competence' (Borghetti, 2013). In turn, conceptualisations of intercultural competence transformed from an

objectifiable, measurable notion to a fluid, relational phenomenon (Byram, 1997) enriched by the notions of a third space (Bhabha, 1990, 1994) and a third, liminal place that can be developed as students explore different languages and cultures (Kramsch, 1993, 2011, 2009/2013). Kramch has emphasised that the notion of third culture refers to 'a symbolic process of meaning-making that sees beyond the dualities of national languages (L1–L2) and national cultures (C1-C2)' (2011, p. 255). Therefore 'on this argument, the ability for language learners and users to navigate their way amongst two or more symbolic systems (languages) is important not just in order to carry out a plethora of functional tasks in the classroom and society, but also in order for them to become 'multilingual subjects' in a world of superdiversity, where they will necessarily engage with a plethora of signs and novel symbolic systems as they move across a universe of different discourse worlds.' (MacDonald, 2019, p. 97).

The dialectic nature of Bhabha's concept offered opportunities to 'move beyond a pre-millennial 'discourse of thirdness' in order to capture both the potential for the (re)creation and (re)generation of our selves, afforded by our engagement with other languages and other 'cultures' (MacDonald, 2019, p. 98).

Increasingly intercultural language learning has been framed as language learning that develops an insider perspective on target cultures, by contextualising knowledge and skills, viewing culture as embedded in the language and critical reflecting on one's own primary language(s) and culture(s) (Sercu, 2002). Communicative approaches have been developed to critically investigate the deeper nature of communication between speakers aiming to stimulate critical cultural understanding (Holliday, 2018).

A significant development has been to refocus the discussion through use of a travel metaphor to examine the relationship between language and culture. Byram (1997), for example, contrasted tourists that travel, believing that their 'way of living will be enriched

but not fundamentally changed by the experience of seeing others' (ibid. 1997, p. 1) while sojourner travellers, learn and acquire 'the capacity to critique and improve their own and others' conditions' (ibid. 1997, p. 2). This perspective recognises that FLE, as with all cultural activities, involves the development of dispositions or epistemological lens that become a way of relating to self, others and the wider world (Andreotti, Biesta & Ahenakew, 2015). A disposition is not formative in a determinist sense, but this notion can be used to recognise that as individuals spend time together so shared ways of seeing and being are negotiated and developed forming 'repertoires' that translate into action (Andreotti, et al., 2015). This process can involve difficult emotions and complex questions for teachers as well as students (Lanas, 2014).

> Dispositions that comprise 'global mindedness' have been defined as:

> a multidimensional concept that is concerned with the ways in which individuals think about and engage with otherness and difference in contexts characterised by plurality, complexity, uncertainty, contingency and inequality (Andreotti, et al. 2015, p. 254).

The dispositions outlined by Andreotti, et al. (2015) are tourism, empathy and visitor. These dispositions contrast with, but are not exclusive of, each other. Whilst tourism assumes the possiblity to understand others from the outside, empathy acknowledges the possibility of bridging difference and seeing from different perspectives, and visitors engage with the discomfort of difference, willing to be taught by others. Andreotti, et al. (2015) suggest that recognising the different orientations of these dispositions helps to understand actions undertaken within different conditions. Ethnocentrism that distances self from other, for example, is associated with the tourism metaphor, ethno-relativism that appreciates common understanding is associated with the empathy metaphor and existentialism that allows for disarmament is associated with the visitor metaphor.

As world and classroom demographics continue to alter, as foreign languages become part of day-to-day life not merely tools for travel or business purposes we turn to the focus of our study which examines the kind of dispositions fostered in two cases of language education. Recognising the existence of different dispositions allows intercultural understanding to be 'composed of contradictions, instabilities, and discontinuities' (Dervin, 2016, p. 82) as well as a form of ethical agency (Lanas & Zembylas, 2015). Whilst the research task is to gain a better understanding of the way in which dispositions are fostered in FLE, the specific research questions underpinning this study are:

1. In what ways are cultural considerations present in the practice of FLE classrooms in the two cases?

2. What kind of intercultural understanding is fostered in the two cases?

Methodology

This section provides an overview of the wider educational contexts for the study. Australia and Finland share similarities as complex multilingual societies having high standards in education, with national curricula that recognize the importance of FLE to support trade and economic development and acknowledge the value of linguistic diversity and the cultural heritage of pupils (ACARA, 2011; FNBE, 2015), yet subtle differences exist in the framing of FLE as outlined below.

The comparative contexts

The Australian Curriculum includes intercultural understanding within the seven 'general capabilities' of 21st century education to be integrated by teachers in every syllabus (ACARA, 2011). FLE is recognised as an 'opportunity for students to engage with the linguistic and cultural diversity of humanity, to reflect on their understanding of human experience in all aspects of social life, and on their own participation and ways of being in the

world' (ACARA, 2011, p. 6). The Australian curriculum promotes specific learning objectives that include 'moving between cultures' (ACARA, 2011, p. 6) and frames intercultural understanding in local and global contexts as engaging with diverse cultures in ways that recognise commonalities and differences in order to develop responsible local and global citizens, capable of living and working together in an interconnected world, cultivating mutual respect. Despite the positive position of FLE in the curriculum, especially within New South Wales, FLE struggles to retain students in elective study with only 9% of students opting to study elective languages at senior levels (Moloney & Xu, 2018).

The revised Finnish curriculum (FNBE, 2015) highlights the importance of 'knowledge and internationality' through cross-cultural themes that aim to strengthen students' 'positive cultural identity and knowledge of cultures' as they learn 'to look at issues from the perspectives of other people's life situations and circumstances, and develop skills in acting as a cultural interpreter' (FNBE, 2015, p. 38). The Finnish curriculum frames language learners as 'users of the target language' and as actors 'in the culturally diverse world in national, European and global communities' (FNBE, 2015, p. 119). Unlike the Australian case, FLE in Finland is a highly valued part of the educational landscape with 99% of Finnish students studying two foreign languages and English the most commonly studied language (Eurostat, 2018).

Dataset design

The dataset was designed to provide insights into the pedagogical thinking and practices in FLE with regard to intercultural understanding, on the cusp of curricular change. This comparative case study focuses on secondary school FLE and uses multiple data sources (see Table 1) to investigate intercultural understanding within FLE. As an explanatory case study (Yin, 2009), this research focuses on how and why questions regarding the development of intercultural understanding and value concrete, context-dependent knowledge

(Flyvbjerg, 2006). The two case schools invited to participate in the study are both respected within their respective communities and once the invitation was accepted, formal permission was requested from the school authorities, participating teachers and student guardians as required by the ethical boards of the researchers' universities.

Table 1: Information on the overall dataset bold font indicates the data drawn on in this study
INSERT TABLE 1 APPROXIMATELY HERE

Quality assurance measures included the joint construction of questionnaires and interview questions, the polyphonic dataset and comparative design to develop a multi-perspectival lens (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). To avoid identifying individuals within the study, participants are referred to by the group they represent: FT Finnish teacher, AT Australian teacher, FSG Finnish students' small group, ASG Australian students' small group. Further information on the dataset is provided in Table 2.
INSERT TABLE 2 APPROXIMATELY HERE

Data analysis

After completion of data collection, data from each school was analysed thematically through descriptive coding, noting the themes that arose repeatedly across interviews and were observed in lessons and field notes (Ezzy, 2002).

The codes in each interview and lesson observation were tabulated to identify those arising more frequently (Miles, Huberman, & Saladana, 2013). Each school's data set was thematically analysed by the authors, who compared their coding and analysis to one another to further increase the validity of our findings (Ezzy, 2002). The findings presented in this paper represent three themes that arose most frequently in the interviews and lesson observations. Each theme is first presented with insights from Australian and then Finnish

language teachers. The teachers' perspectives and practices are then followed by Australian and then Finnish student perspectives. The main focus of our analysis is on intercultural understanding and pedagogical practices. The data analysis followed Dervin's and Jackson's emphasis on the complexity of intercultural encounters (Dervin et al., 2012, Jackson, 2014). As Hermans (2001) explains, self and culture comprise a multiplicity of positions developed over time and space through dialogic engagement. These positions provide alternative vantage points for critically reflecting on the questions of the intercultural understanding, self and other, and connections between us. Further, on-site notes on the events observed, notes on unrecorded events and field notes were written to provide contextual information as well as examples of classroom practice.

Findings

The findings divide into three key themes that provide different entry points into the cultural considerations present within the two cases as well as the intercultural understanding that is fostered through pedagogical actions and student responses.

Theme 1: Culture as artefact

> Although researchers have tried to move beyond culture as artefact (e.g. Borghetti, 2013), in both cases, the language educators used artefacts including literary extracts, video clips and stories, popular songs and media as pedagogical tools, for example, 'culture minutes' (AT2). As AT1 explained,… we use many Youtube clips and sites …, news reports, articles, …. [to] keep up-to-date with what is happening in other countries ... We also look at it from a philosophical point of view in that the French do not see the world necessarily as we see it and why (AT1)

In another lesson students were asked to discuss in small groups and to compare their educational experiences with those presented in a documentary on China. In these examples the Australian educators considered artefacts as an opportunity to move beyond established identities, to remove barriers and enter into a 'global' and 'multi-voiced' space. Whilst this

practice seeks to critically engage with others, this also creates a new pedagogical challenge which is how to help the students go beyond superficial responses comparing similarities and differences, but where these characteristics derive from and what can be learnt from critically reflecting on these examples.

The Finnish educators incorporated cultural artefacts through the thematic units of course textbooks including literary excerpts, recorded songs, dialogues, pictures as well as. YouTube videos, newspaper articles. In one lesson, the class worked with a feature on 'Finnish Whizz kids' from a *Wall Street Journal* article. The language teacher began with language questions to engage with the information presented in the text before sharing the original text with the students and asking them to identity five surprising, questionable points. For example, the *Wall Street Journal* article stated that Finnish students do not have homework, a statement contradicted in most lessons in Finnish schools. This activity encouraged students to draw on their own experiences, to critically engage with the text and to begin to voice their perspective rather than accept what is given.

In both cases, the use of cultural artefacts involved negotiations with previous experiences as well as cultural voices within and beyond the classroom. A Finnish educator started a lesson with a popular Puerto Rican singer and songwriter Ricky Martin video focusing on greetings and expressions of thank you and farewell in Spanish. With the help of a glossary was on the board the students appeared to happily engage with the task practising 'Ricky Martin' style greetings. At the end of the lesson, however, when the educator asked the students to follow the etiquette guidelines to say 'thank you' and 'goodbye', the lesson finished with silence. This teacher outlined the disjuncture between her language educator ideal and the cultural habits of her students:

> Sometimes it really does disturb me, … We don't have this greeting culture in Finland.
> But … I start my class and I say 'Buenos dias'… and nobody answers... I say once more,

> 'Buenos dias' … and once more... If you don't answer, if you don't greet me, it's so
> impolite. You can't do it in Spain. So, let's practice it... (FT1)

On the one hand, the curriculum requires the teacher to teach the norms of the target language culture, on the other hand, the Finnish students return to their norms having left the liminal third place (Kramsch, 1993, 2011, 2009/2013) created through the activities. These complex negotiations illustrate the way in which considerations beyond the language classroom are involved in the development of intercultural understanding. FLE involves multiple voices and multiple positions that vie to inform the intercultural dispositions of students.

To assume that students are not aware of this dissonance, however, misconstrues their perspective. Some Australian students, for example, noted lack of exposure to the histories and cultures of their target languages as a disadvantage for their language studies. One student, Anna, commented:

> … we do not really learn about Spanish history at all and it can be interesting to
> understand . . . the culture of the language you are studying. . . . You can have a bit of a
> background where the language came from, what influenced it, may be how it changed;
> all these kind of things (ASG1).

Anna's family interest in Spanish culture meant that she had watched Spanish films and through these cultural artefacts, she had gained access to diverse views of the world and specific national attitudes. Although the student could not always fully understand a Spanish film, she appreciated 'picking up on small things' encountering a 'completely different sense of humour' (ASG1). In contrast, other students expressed indifference towards the value of films in FLE. Films were reduced to language learning exercises or considered 'boring' or 'a joke: everyone is just laughing' (ASG1). The main complaint was that the content did not inspire any curiosity or engagement, YouTube clips and films were merely 'just another way to watch a movie' (ASG2). This dismissal of cultural artefacts suggests a tourist disposition

that anticipates little value in encountering others, a disposition that contrasts with the vulnerability of Anna's visitor disposition. Moreover, these examples highlight the lack of a pedagogical bridge to help students move beyond initial dispositions and to explore new positions and perspectives.

The Finnish students responded to culture as an artefact in a different way. Their immediate associations were with the cultural content of language textbooks. Several students (and teachers) noted, for example, that 'Course number 5 was about cultures, we learned about different sides of cultures, films and music. It is important so we do not do something disrespectful when we go to these countries' (FSG3). These tourist dispositions were somewhat enriched with the appreciation of diverse content and a critical awareness that the cultural content of EFL classes differed from other FLE courses. As a student noted, 'In English class we don't concentrate on English speaking countries as compared to the French class where it is all about French culture' (FSG2).

Finnish students also seemed to recognise the presence of cultural content across the curriculum, for example with the inclusion of art history in history courses. Moreover, the students appreciated the themes of language courses on business and economics, the environment, leisure, studies and careers as opportunities for engaging with others. As several students noted, language courses are 'about the world, not only Finland' … 'new vocabulary is more challenging' but new vocabulary can be 'googled' enabling the students to 'tell people more about Finland using the terms of [e.g.] biology' (FSG3). These responses suggest students were developing empathetic dispositions that recognise difference between cultures; however, the lack of critical reflection in their responses raises the question as to how robust their empathetic dispositions might be if faced with uncomfortable intercultural encounters that require more than correct vocabulary In both cases, cultural artefacts were staple features of FLE. Although the teachers sought to encourage critical reflection with

material artefacts, an invisible ceiling seems to exist between the theoretical ideals of critical intercultural engagement and the pedagogical challenge of critically engaging with different voices, respecting as well as responding to difference. Moreover, students with less experience of cultural encounters and with fewer positions to draw on, need greater support from educators to go beyond artefacts as representations and to seek critical intercultural understanding.

Theme 2: Role of experience

For the teachers in both cases, cultural experiences were integral to FLE. The teachers used their own experiences and students' experiences as personally meaningful pedagogical tools to develop the students' intercultural understanding. For the Australian teachers, interactions with native speakers of the target language/culture and discussions based on students' experiences of different cultures were valued. As one educator noted, 'If students are taught only the structures of a language, they aren't truly competent. They are likely to violate rules of formality, politeness etc – albeit unwittingly' (AT1). Experiencing life in different contexts, however, provides different perspectives, such as how English or Spanish changes in and across different cultural settings (AT3), and it is this kind of richer view that the teachers hope to promote through their pedagogical action.

The Australian teachers expressed a desire to create moments for their students so that, 'some sort of thing … clicks in their minds … you can't understand why someone else does something unless you have realised somehow in your own mind there is no such thing as "normal" for example or" right", or "correct"' (AT4). The Australian educators seemed to use their own critical experiences as inspiration to recreate similar moments in the language classroom, although they also acknowledged that, 'It is hard to recreate such situation in a

class, … They just sort of laugh about their experiences' (AT4) rather than seeing them as valuable resources for their own learning and the learning of others.

In the interviews with Finnish teachers, cultural experiences often turned to their travels abroad. These experiences were used to inspire pedagogical action, and as the material for language education. Although the teachers invited students to share their travel experiences, in the observations and interviews teacher anecdotes were important pedagogical tools used to personalise intercultural understanding. In these anecdotes, teachers shared vulnerabilities, for example failing to appropriately address authorities when asking for help or visiting a school France (FT4), as well as cultural understanding. In one lesson, a teacher shared an anecdote from when she had taken students to London and one student bumped into the wheelchair of a young girl when photographing Big Ben and offered, 'oops' by way of apology. The father was so insulted, he threatened to call the police. The teacher explained that the boy, frozen by horror and with limited English, was unable to say more. The teacher further explained that Finns are less eloquent than Brits and 'oops' is actually an expression of deep regret. The situation was resolved as the father accepted how very different cultures can be. With this anecdote, the teacher highlighted the value of intercultural understanding and the vulnerability of cultural travellers, although at the same time reinforcing stereotypical views of Finnish and British communication which could also have been critically reconsidered..

For the Australian and Finnish students, first-hand experiences played an important role in deepening understanding:

> I have been to Germany. It was beautiful. I went there as an exchange student for two weeks. Went to school with them, had lessons. It was very different, like the way they have lessons, the way they do things. They are more relaxed. (ASG1).

I lived in Switzerland for four years, I have many friends there. It is important to understand how different cultures function, to understand things better. Languages open professional opportunities, not so many Australians speak languages (ASG4).

In Japanese culture, they always like to clean. I guess it is part of their culture; it makes their society the better place. But also obviously … that goes back . . . like very deep in the culture (ASG4).

These responses indicate how experience can foster a positive appreciation of the other and how students without cultural experiences can seem to miss important material for developing basic intercultural understanding. As one student notes, 'We learn very much by the book, we do not know any slang. When we go to Spain you do not say, "How are you?" You will be like "Hi!" Do you know what I mean?' (ASG3).

Finnish students similarly appreciated first-hand experiences, which appear to foster intercultural appreciation as a form of understanding. Many students indicated the value of seeing how others live, even though cultures are 'hard to explain. There are these basic values of life' (FSG6), but 'in Spain, it might be normal' (FSG1). For many students exchange programs and travelling abroad give a feeling of increased independence and self-confidence. In addition to having a better appreciation of their own country, they also appreciated the other, their values, and lifestyles. Experiences with exchange students, learning 'how they think and how they speak' and recognizing that guests introduced 'to Finnish food, took them to sauna. They were too polite to say that they did not like it' (FSG3).

These reflections indicate how intercultural understanding is developed in relation to existing understandings whether as a Finn or as a European. For some Finnish students, cultural differences related to geographical positions, Europe as 'one continent people are close to each other, and cultures are similar' (FSG4), travelling to 'the Netherlands it was not different from Finland but when … [in] Japan … I am in a different culture' (FSG6). For an Australian student, education in Germany was relaxing, yet for a Finnish student 'as an

exchange student at [a German] school, atmosphere was not as relaxed as here, teachers are different' (FSG2).

In both cases, participants suggested that intercultural understanding develops through social interaction and the shared examples point to how specific experiences can support awareness and develop intercultural understanding as meaningful and in somewhat different ways in the two cases. In Finland there was greater emphasis on understanding one's own culture as a way to engage with others, whereas in Australia the emphasis was on the (re)creation of critical reflection within the third place of the classroom. In both cases, however, the use of personal experiences as a pedagogical resource to develop intercultural understanding is challenging. Although the examples indicate how intercultural encounters can encourage perceptiveness and introspection, the positive overtones of these examples lack the uncomfortable challenge of having to reconsider one's own view on the world and the growing pains of developing a more critical appreciation of what it means to engage with others. The references to native-speaking others is also somewhat problematic indicating that 'native speakerism' is still part of the cultural make-up of FLE, valorising rather than critically engaging with others, although the students' contributions indicate that there is a space for digging deeper into cultural practices and assumptions. These points highlight how FLE is also a cultural entity with established habits that continue to inform the practice of FL educators, habits that need to be recognised in order to be addressed.

Theme 3: Belonging to a global community

The participants from both cases were positively disposed to the notion of a global community. Australian and Finnish educators both seemed to recognise differences in cultural values and the importance of language education for preparing students to work well within the global community although intercultural communication was mainly discussed

within the Western context suggesting a limited geopolitical perspective. The Australian

educators placed greater emphasis on intercultural activity as part of an educational pathway.

As one educator noted:

> We live in such a global world and kids are very aware of it. For example, they are
> choosing an IB program very often because they want to have that option to go overseas
> to study if they want to. They are much more aware about importance of intercultural
> knowledge; 10 years ago they were not. It was more like we are here in Australia we do
> not need another language. So people started to realise how important it is. (AT4)

An Australian teacher explained that learning to speak within different ethnic communities

means developing a better understanding that current national and global space is not static

but constantly changing (AT3). The Australian teachers, however, seemed to feel that their

positive stance on the global community was not shared by the wider society. As an educator

observed:

> In Australia the language teachers are dedicated, they are against the whole society. They
> have to be very driven to be doing it. Otherwise you would not last for very long
> because people do not value your work… The value in language, it is about money if you
> cannot make money with this language so why do you do it? It is nothing to do with
> civilisations, or learning various skills. To me it goes way beyond ordering a croissant in
> France and that seems to be the level people are stuck at. (AT4)

> The Finnish educators held a more pragmatic view. One teacher explained:

> It's very efficient, very useful for them to learn as many languages as they can. So to
> really use it, a functional purpose, I'd say, to be able to communicate about whatever you
> want to. Talk about feelings or your job or to sell something, for instance, or whatnot.
> It's not only the language but the way you try and survive in the world where you don't
> know the language that well.   (FT2)

The Finnish teachers also differentiated between academic knowledge and deeper, richer

understanding. They recognised that students need support, for example, 'If you read a text

about some cultural aspect it may be a bit dry and people do not necessarily understand what it means and what the differences are' (FT4). Moreover, students need 'as many languages' as they can learn as, 'It's not only the language but the way you try and survive in the world' (FT3). It would be worth asking, however, what is meant be 'surviving'. In the teachers' explanations, intercultural understanding seems to be a tool for personal or economic advancement working towards tourist dispositions that anticipate little change when engaging with others.

An experienced Finnish educator raised a more difficult aspect of intercultural understanding, saying that 'The Finnish language is a very big part of own national spirit and people are always worried of Finnish language degrading because of English...' (FT2). For the Finnish teachers, the national curriculum emphasizes the need to 'be more tolerant, more respect other countries' (FT2) but teachers can be left with ambivalent feelings towards the changing society:

> '…we do not necessarily have to adopt their ways, but to a certain degree to
> understand them and to respect them… But our way is our way. . . Of course because
> now we have more immigrants in Finland we really have the need for information…
> [otherwise] it is easier to be prejudiced … you just think they behave in a really weird
> way and that's it! Weird is sort of like bad weird. (FT2)

This example highlights a key challenge in the development of intercultural understanding. On the one hand, the teachers positively refer to the assumed cultures of target language speakers, yet as the fabric of local societies is rewoven, an uncomfortable disjuncture seems to develop as intercultural understanding is considered appropriate with regard to the others 'out there' yet not necessarily offered to the others 'here'.

The students in both cases expressed a different stance to the teachers. The Australian students seemed to have a blended sense of cultural identity as the starting point for their

relationship with the wider community. One Australian student commented, 'Everyone is immigrating; globalisation. Countries no longer have one predominant race. Speaking a second language is an advantage professionally. Australia is shrinking. . .' (ASG2). Some students see themselves as 'citizens of the world' and described Sydney as a 'a multicultural city I feel I am part of it, it does not matter which identity I have' (ASG5). The diffuse way in which the students seemed to experience the development of their identity was a common theme in the small group interviews. One student explained,

I think we come under the Western cultural identity, Europe very much, but since we are so multicultural we started to drift away into our own culture, own identity, we are not Asian or Middle Eastern; we are our own culture and identity' (ASG1)

Another student said, '… we are a globalised country now, and everything is global and you can't think regional anymore because everything is just outsourced. Having another language and also understanding another culture differentiate you from other people I guess' (ASG3). Unlike the Finnish educators, these students seemed to readily accept the fluidity of merging of cultures and identities.

In contrast, the Finnish participants expressed a stronger sense of cultural identity as Finns whilst recognising a generational difference in the perception of the global community. One student remarked that, 'Only old people [worry about the dominance of English], it is evolution. So it is a positive thing. We are not concerned that Finnish will vanish' (FSG3). The student participants appeared more confident as, 'The Finnish language is a very big part of own national spirit and people are always worried of Finnish language degrading because of English and all that' (FSG2). The confidence in these statements acknowledges the inevitability of a global community, connected by the internet, which is 'really good … we

understand each other in the world' (FSG1). On the other hand, '"Intercultural" means becoming more global… not just your own culture that you have; it is pretty much the whole Western world is becoming one unified culture … not just the Finnish or just the American culture…' (FSG4). Although the comments from Finnish students are more reserved than their Australian peers, in both cases the students bypass the complexities of intercultural understanding. Their positive disposition, however, does not translate into a more complex understanding of intercultural encounters perhaps because the complexity of intercultural understanding is rarely an explicit part of their education.

In both cases, belonging to a global community was inevitable. The teachers highlighted the need for intercultural understanding as a means to survive in the global community, although the relationship between the global and the local was portrayed as an uneasy relationship. The students tended to focus on the amalgamation of different cultures wiping away cultural differences or the value of being different. In both contexts, the boundary between 'us and them' was present, although where the boundary was placed seemed to reflect whether the attitude of the participants was more protectionist (Finland) or empathetic (Australia). Neither case, however, addressed religious or political dialogue with reference to intercultural considerations and limited critical thinking nor the challenge of really digging into the complexities of intercultural understanding as a necessary aspect of FLE and a move away from essentialist cultural portrayals.

Discussion

The overall research task in this study is to explore the formation of intercultural understanding in FLE in two different cases. By placing these cases side-by-side, subtle differences in pedagogical actions are more easily identifiable. For example, whereas

Australian teachers drew on student experiences as a way into intercultural discussions, Finnish teachers drew on their own experiences to illustrate intercultural considerations. This case study, however, also illustrates the subtle ways in which intercultural understanding becomes integrated into the culture of FLE, often as favoured feature, yet also vulnerable to invisible assumptions that can potentially undermine the formation of intercultural understanding. The discussion addresses key features of the cases before introducing the metaphor of neighbour to support the development of intercultural understanding as part of FLE.

The three themes in the findings are derived from the dataset of teacher and student responses and classroom-based activities. Although artefacts, for example, have received negative attention in research on FLE due to the ease with which they can promote stereotypes and simplify cultural difference and intercultural encounters (Jackson, 2014), there is arguably value in bringing concrete artefacts into the daily life of students, especially for students unaware of intercultural encounters. As the 'Whizz kids' example illustrates, educators can initiate intercultural reflections with artefacts that arise from the culture of the students – and then with the students deconstruct why it is inaccurate to say that all Finns like sauna or all Australians surf. Seeking background information on artefacts can support the development of critical reflections and promote critical literacy skills, as well as help to promote understanding of how culture/s change and develop over time in response to different conditions. The critical handling of artefacts can and should acknowledge that intercultural understanding depends on how individuals understand themselves and perceive others (Sercu, 2002; Lázár, 2007), gaps in understanding, attempts to learn more and the discomfort of being challenged or confused, indeed vulnerable (Smith & Carvill, 2000; Lanas, 2014).

Sharing the novelty and vulnerability of cultural encounters was an important pedagogical tool for the teachers in both cases, although there was little indication of how

novelty or vulnerability can foster intercultural understanding. This could be due to constructivist educational approaches that frame teachers as facilitators responsible for developing the conditions for critical conversations, rather than participating as critical guides (Biesta, 2011) or the tendency of FLE to reduce cultural issues to contextual frames for vocabulary development and grammatical structures (Smith & Carvill, 2000). The absence of pedagogical strategies to go beyond observations of cultural difference to meaningful explorations of intercultural understanding is problematic sustaining at best tourist dispositions, at worst curbing student curiosity and curtailing intercultural understanding.

The curricular goals of FLE came through most clearly with regard to the third theme, belonging to a global community, easily reduced to advantageous participation in the future job market. The inevitable mixing and merging described by teachers and students suggests that accepting societal changes assumes an essential similarity that enables the development of a blended community. This disposition, however, potentially undermines the mutual enrichment of cultural encounters when both parties are willing to engage with the other, to ask questions and critically reflect together, without the assumption they should become the same (Bakhtin, 1986; Hermans, 2001). This blended stance valorises the potential benefits of cultural encounters, without acknowledging the discomfort and challenges that this can bring (Lanas, 2014). Teachers in neither case seemed to sense work out this dilemma nor saw this difficult conversation as a pedagogical issue to explore with students. As an educator in Australia noted, language educators often feel they are working against, not with, the general perceptions of society. In response to this dilemma, as well as the observations that intercultural understanding is not only for the global 'out there' but needed as part of the local 'here-and-now' we would like to suggest another disposition, that of being a neighbour.

Being a neighbour suggests a relationship that draws on ethical agency to overcome misunderstandings, power dynamics and responsibilities that can arise when living side-by-

side (Bhabha, 2011). A significant difference between the tourist, empathy and visitor metaphors and the metaphor of the neighbour is the spatial proximity of the other as well as the temporal duration of the relationship. Moreover, tourists and visitors can leave as and when they choose, empathy can be exercised from a distance, but a neighbour by definition is nearby and often not selected. Emerson (1996) suggests that for Bakhtin, being a neighbour recognises the incompleteness of individuals and the necessity of sharing life with others; even if we cannot understand others, they are worthy of our attention and appreciation, and we can be enriched by engaging with their difference (Bakhtin, 1986). This is not to over-idealise or simplify relationships with others, but the metaphor of a neighbour provides a different starting point. To be a neighbour underlines the interconnectivity of a shared life and the ethical call to be responsible for who and how one chooses to be in relation to others or where to sign one's name in Bakhtinian terms (Bakhtin, 1993; Emerson, 1996).

In an earlier draft of this paper, an anonymous reviewer challenged us to address the question as to whether an ethical response can be required within FLE. We confirm that to demand a particular ethical response cannot be considered a pedagogical action. As the examples in this study demonstrate, whatever the pedagogical strategy of a teacher, students ultimately hold the responsibility for deciding ethically how to use language. However, this does not absolve FLE teachers, students or researchers from considering what their stance towards others and the wider world is: the pedagogical responsibility to address difficult questions remains (Lanas, 2014).

The sharing of critical anecdotes is not a complete answer, but this approach theorises experience in ways that allow emphathy and understanding to inform one another (Hermans, 2001). It is these examples that demonstrate the greatest sensitivity to cultural encounters and awareness of the complexity of intercultural understanding and allowing for imagination avoids over-reliance on personal experiences. Employing different modalities for critical

exploration can also avoid the embarrassed or derisive laughter or non-participation in language classrooms. Another important question is how to develop the pedagogical practices of FLE teachers in a way that helps them to enter into challenging conversations with students that open up different positions to examine intercultural questions, experiences and dilemmas (Lanas, 2014).

To foster this kind of conversation is a significant cultural development within FLE. As the examples from both cases in our study demonstrate, FLE continues to harbour cultural traits from earlier times. The developments that have taken place within theorisations of FLE have not yet led to the development of new dispositions in FLE, rather familiar approaches, such as the use of artefacts, are employed for alternative ends. We hope that this study demonstrates the value of cross-case dialogues that explore from different perspectives, enriching understanding without suggesting there is only one way in which intercultural understanding can be developed, helping to bring to light the cultural layers of FLE and opening new vistas for further dialogue.

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TABLE 1
Information on the dataset used in this study

DATA TOOLS	FOCUS	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
demographic questionnaire	Background information on participants	7 teachers (Finland) 5 teachers (Australia)
semi-structured teacher interviews	Teacher perspectives on FLE in particular intercultural aspects	7 teachers (Finland) 5 teachers (Australia)
semi-structured interviews with teacher educators	Teacher educator perspectives on intercultural aspects of FLE	2 teacher educators (Finland) 1 teacher educator (Australia)
small group student interviews	Student perspectives on FLE in particular intercultural aspects	54 students (Finland) 38 students (Australia)
student questionnaires	Student perspectives on intercultural aspects of individual lessons	54 students (Finland) 38 students (Australia)
non-participatory lesson observations (field notes, narrative summaries)	Pedagogical practice within the classroom environment	2 international researchers

TABLE 2
Extended information on the dataset used in this study

	PARTICIPANTS	BACKGROUND INFORMATION	DATA
Teachers	12 female teachers of varying ages (25-60 years) years of work experience (6-38 years)	The teachers are qualified language teachers and fluent in the language/s they teach and all have had personal experience of associated cultures	individual teacher interviews - audio recorded & transcribed
Students	forty Year 10, Year 11 and Year 12 students (male and female, 15-18 years).	Elective language students	Small group discussions of 3-6 students were selected from those who consented, with a total of 38 students (Australia) and 54 students (Finland).
Classroom observations	languages represented in both contexts (English, Spanish, German, French)	The classes in the study had between 10-20 students (Australia) and 10-25 students (Finland),	Observation field notes (45 lessons) Photographs of language

	In Finland 2 international researchers In Australia 1 international researcher	aged 15-18, from beginners to continuers levels in the languages they were learning.	classrooms (Australia) Video recordings of language lessons (Finland)