

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Foreign Language Lecturers in Malaysia and Interculturality: Common (Mis-)understandings

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Many researchers refer to interculturality as a macro phenomenon and use a rather static approach to culture, neglecting the importance of the individual experience during interactions. The standpoint of foreign language instructors on interculturality is very significant because they are the mediators between source and target languages and the relationship between language instructors, learners and knowledge are interrelated. Based on Bauman's opposition between solid and liquid modernity (2001) and Dervin's Janusian approach (2008), I examine the representations of interculturality among native and non-native language lecturers in Malaysia. Semi-structured interviews on the concept of interculturality and how to develop it were conducted with 12 lecturers teaching French in two local universities. The data collected show that most of the participants adopt a solid or a Janusian approach on teaching "interculturality". The role of the prefix "*inter-*" has been neglected and the word "intercultural" in their context is used as synonym of cultural without the meaning of interaction. The *Self* and the *Other* is most of the time reduced to a monocultural individual and lecturers do not take into consideration the diverse multilingual experiences of the learners, nor the multicultural context of the country.

Keywords: Foreign language teaching, liquid interculturality, Intercultural competence, interculturality, Malaysia.

许多研究者常把跨文化关系比喻为一种宏观现象，并且以一种颇为“固态”的角度来看待文化，从而忽略了互动关系中个人经验的重要性。外语教师看待跨文化关系的角度是非常重要的，因为他们在源语言与目标语言中扮演着传递者的角色。另外，外语教师，学习者以及知识间的关系也是息息相关的。基于齐格蒙特·鲍曼对“固态”和“流动”现代性（2001）以及德尔文的“Janusian”角度（2008），通过半结构式访谈，本文审查了

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马来西亚的本土与非本土母语教师对于跨文化关系的看法：十二位在两所本地大学执教的法语教师陈述了他们对跨文化关系以及其发展方式的看法。数据显示，在跨文化关系教学上，大部分的参与者采用了“固态”或“Janusian”角度。“跨”作为前缀的角色已被忽视，所以“跨文化”对他们而言只是一种“文化”的代名词，并没有互动的意思，而“自我”以及“他人”的定义很多时候已被简化至单一文化的人体。另外，教师也不把学习者的多种语言经验和该国的多元文化语境考虑在内。

Introduction

Malaysia is a multilingual nation located in Southeast Asia where four major languages (Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English) and many vernacular languages (Iban, Dusun, Bajau, Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese, Punjabi, etc.) are used dynamically. Of the 137 living languages spoken in the country (Lewis, 2009), Malay has been declared the sole official and national language after a transitional period of 10 years following the 1957 independence. This language is used in most official situations: parliamentary debates, official letters, official ceremonies, etc. However, Malaysians may also use other languages in other situations and for example some primary schools use Tamil or Mandarin as a medium of instruction (Machart & Lim, 2013a). The language of the former colonial rulers, English, is also widely spread and sociolinguists estimate that it is used daily by 25% of urban Malaysians (McArthur, 2002, p. 325) even in official contexts (Ozog, 1990, p. 312). English is considered as an asset because of its position as the world major lingua franca in international business (Rogerson-Revell, 2007), it may appear as granted in the country where it is considered “a second language” (Asmah, 2009) but its place in education (e.g. as the medium of instruction for sciences and mathematics) has often been debated in recent years (Kärchner-Ober, 2007) and its use is still questioned especially among Malay speakers (Airil, 2013). Yet, English is rarely associated with UK (or USA, Australia and New Zealand) and its representations among Malaysians tend to confirm that it is perceived as a lingua franca with few connections with the places where the language was originally spoken (Machart, Lim & Lim, 2010).

Beside these languages, the government encourages the learning and teaching of foreign languages. The Ministry of Higher Education acknowledged the importance of foreign language learning in the *National Higher Education Strategic Plan Beyond 2020* (MOHE, 2007), where it is stated that “proficiency in the third language is vital for developing human capital that drives the K-economy as well as gears the country towards competitive innovation in the international arena” (p. 62). In order to promote better human development, the Malaysian government has decided to develop foreign language learning because “a nation whose citizens are proficient in foreign languages is bound to have the distinct advantage of being better-placed to have access to foreign technology that is crucial to nation building” (Zubairi & Sarudin, 2009, p. 74). This goes by pair with the internationalisation of its higher education; in 2010, 79200 Malaysians were studying abroad, mainly in Australia and UK, but increasingly also in Egypt, France, Germany or Japan (MOHE, 2011) where they study in Arabic, French, German and Japanese respectively.

On 7 July 2004, foreign languages have been relabeled as “international languages” by the Ministry of Education at a meeting held by the Curriculum Development Centre

(KPM, 2004), showing the objective of internationalisation that the government had fixed in having these languages in the curriculum and the learning of 'international' languages has been widened to government schools in order to broaden the use of 'foreign' languages among citizens. Foreign language teaching officially started in some privileged secondary schools (where Japanese, Arabic, French and Mandarin are taught as an elective subject) in the eighties and in 1998 and 2001 respectively, two public universities i.e. Universiti Malaya and Universiti Putra Malaysia started a degree programme in French (Machart & Lim, 2009). These two universities are the only institutions that offer a degree programme in French and they enrol approximately thirty students every year. In 2013, thirteen French language lecturers (four native and nine non-native speakers) were involved in these two programmes. They become a major source for students to obtain their knowledge about the French language and intercultural skills in French as most students do not have any prior knowledge about this language and spend more than ten hours per week with their lecturers since the first semester. Thus, it could be supposed that the lecturers' representation and their approach to interculturality would affect the students' knowledge about linguistic and intercultural skills.

The main objective of this article is to examine foreign language lecturers' understanding of interculturality in the context of teaching in a plurilingual context. Malaysian learners of a foreign/international language are at least bilingual (Malay/English), often speak three (Mandarin or Tamil/Malay/English) or even more languages. It seems important to look at how lecturers conceptualize interculturality because its meaning may vary depending on individuals and it appears as a "chameleon" concept (Earley & Peterson, 2004). Do they move away from a 'source culture'/target culture' dichotomy by including more fluidity in this linguistically diverse context?

The Different Facets of Interculturality: Solid, Liquid and Janusian

Dervin (2008) classifies the approach to interculturality in three categories: solid, liquid and Janusian. The first two terms (*solid* and *liquid*) have been borrowed from Bauman (2001) and applied to intercultural studies whereas *Janusian* has been coined by the researcher himself. In the solid 'intercultural' approach, culture is understood as the representation of a particular group and individuals in this group are usually seen as identical. They are "homogeneous entities" and *culture* becomes a synonym for "thoughts, feelings, values, and beliefs of individuals" (Sarangi, 1994, p. 410). Most researchers have the idea that foreign language learners should not focus only on foreign language learning, but that the culture of the target language must also be taught in a foreign language class (Kramsch, 1995, 2013; Krasner, 1999; Genc & Bada, 2005). In order to teach culture (interculturality is often misunderstood and is often used as a synonym of culture), many teachers use a mono-cultural approach based on the idea of a single culture associated with the target language. In a review article, Byram and Feng (2004) claim that the current movement in language teaching is focused on cultural awareness and the ways to overcome its shortcomings. The lecturers/teachers aim to develop learners' cultural awareness and knowledge of the differences rather than stressing on communicative or intercultural competences in order to interact with speakers of the language. The solid approach has been criticised by many researchers (Gilroy, 1990; Byram, 1997; Abdallah Pretceille, 2001; Dervin & Dirba, 2006) because it does not necessarily have any relationship with the

learners' own culture. Stereotypes would exist or even be reinforced in the mind of the learners even they do not interact with anyone who speaks the target language. However, it is still popularly used by many foreign language lecturers. Galloway (1981) has identified four common mono-cultural approaches: "(1) the *4-F Approach*: Folk-dances, festivals, fairs, and food. (2) the *Tour Guide Approach*: the identification of monuments, rivers, and cities. (3) the *"By-the-Way" Approach*: Sporadic lectures or bits of behaviour selected indiscriminately to emphasize sharp differences. (4) the *Frankenstein Approach*: A taco from here, a flamenco dancer from there, a gaucho from here, a bullfight from there". All these approaches are limited in giving authentic examples or samples. When a foreign language lecturer puts emphasis on cultural awareness, there is a danger that students may appropriate representations of a static cultural environment. These approaches only provide learners with imaginary information and lead learners to compare the foreign culture with their own cultures and create a solid image of national groups (Dervin, 2007a). Thus, these mono-cultural approaches are not suitable for developing intercultural skills. From the point of view of a foreign language learner, it would bring about better intercultural communication if one can ignore all the intercultural imagination that will lead to stereotyping and regard the importance of real interaction.

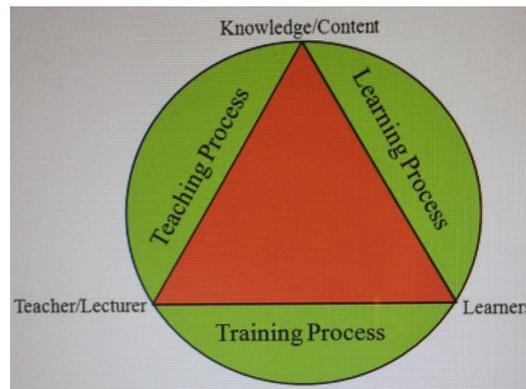
In order to move away from intercultural imagination (Dervin, 2007a), and inspired by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's opposition between solidity and liquidity (2001), the liquid interculturality approach (Dervin, 2011) can also sometimes be noticed in foreign language classes. Kitayama for example (2002) advocates that understanding culture should be dynamic, flexible and changeable because nothing is fix. Every individual is unique and represents himself and should not be seen as a mere representation of his nationality/race/ethnicity (Machart & Lim, 2013b). The aim of this approach in language teaching is to develop learners' intercultural and communicative competences, and the learner is now viewed as an "intercultural speaker" who "crosses frontiers, and who is to some extent specialist in the transit of cultural property and symbolic values" (Byram & Zarate, 1997). For the defenders of fluid interculturality, it is important to stress on how identities are constructed (processes), rather than on a solid national culture seen as objects and the term identification (in opposition to a static identity) is preferable (Dervin, 2013; Machart & Lim, 2013b). The change of the learners' role from someone who knows the target culture into an "intercultural speaker" has also modified the task of the lecturers' whose objectives are now different: besides focusing on linguistic codes, they have the responsibility to develop learners' acquisition of intercultural competence which goes beyond national culture, by guiding learners based on the idea that one should not identify the other party with his cultural identity when an intercultural communication takes place. Rather than 'intercultural' communication, Miyahara describes the interaction as "interpersonal" (2004) with a speaker of another language. In the literal meaning, *intercultural* brings out the idea of interaction between two (often national) 'cultures', while the term *interpersonal* focuses on the interaction between two individuals and not only their culture(s). Along the same line, Martine Abdallah-Preteille (2001) asks: "what do we need to know about others or about their culture in order to communicate effectively with them?" (p. 138) and relegates culture to a secondary position. The identification between interlocutors can be broader and more natural if it is based on the interpersonal experiences rather than on cultural stereotypes (Knapp & Daly, 2002).

Meanwhile, Dervin (2008) identified what he calls the Janusian approach: some

researchers or lecturers believe that they are going beyond solid interculturality and claim a certain form of liquidity, but they are still confused and struggle between these two approaches. In other words, these two kinds of approaches (solid and liquid) exist at the same time in the discourse of the researcher. While they claim to adopt liquid interculturality and advocate that everyone is individual and should not be reduced to any (national, ethnic, cultural, etc.) representation and face prejudice or stereotype, they see, recognise or talk about individuals in terms of cultural elements (Dervin, 2013) showing that they may not have a real or deep understanding of liquidity.

If we observe the didactic triangle (Houssaye, 1992) in figure 1, we can notice the important position played by the lecturer whose role as a mediator between knowledge and learners cannot be ignored. His representations would affect the selection of contents and methods but also impact on the learners' construction of interculturality through interaction and relationship during the "training process". The learners may absorb imaginary information of the target language or regard intercultural skills from a liquid point of view. The representations of the 'target culture' in teaching material have been analysed for example by Zarate (2004) and some studies focus on students representations in particular contexts (e.g. Alén Gabarato et al, 2003) even in the case of Malaysia (Machart, Lim & Lim, 2010). In this article, I would like to focus on the third corner, i.e. the lecturer and his understanding of interculturality.

Figure 1: The didactic triangle after Houssaye (1992, p. 41)



Design of the Study

To examine the lecturers' representation of interculturality, semi-structured interviews were carried out with twelve lecturers (four males, eight females) who were teaching the BA French programme in the two public universities in Malaysia (Universiti Malaya and Universiti Putra Malaysia). The interviews focused on the lecturers' representations of interculturality and the way to develop intercultural skills, addressing questions like the meaning interculturality and its importance for the lecturer, how to teach interculturality, the adequacy of students' intercultural skills to real life communication, and suggestions on how to improve them.

Three of the participants are native speakers of French (NL1, NL2 and NL3), and the other nine are non-native (NNL1, NNL2, NNL3 and so on). They represent 92% (twelve out of thirteen lecturers) of all the lecturers in these programmes. The interviews were

conducted in English with the participants in their own office within a period of four weeks and were then transcribed.

To analyse the data, I will adopt the discourse-historical approach (Wodak & Reisigl, 2001; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009) in order to analyse the dialectical relationship between the particular discursive practices and the social context (social structure, institutional knowledge/power, situation, etc.). Through this approach, rather than “what” the participants say, the emphasis would be put on “how” the participants present their ideas and “why” they do so. In other words, the language/text used by the participants is linked with their past and present knowledge, social position, convention, value, etc. Accordingly, social, institutional and social settings would shape the discourses of participants and vice versa due to the dialectical relationship between them (Wodak, 2001). In addition, the analysis would take into consideration the social position of participants and interviewer during the interview. The unequal power and the desire to use the power could be seen through the words used by participants during the interviews. The interviewer is a former student of one of these two programmes and by interviewing her former lecturers, obvious student/lecturer power relations may surface.

The content and linguistic analysis of the interviews will focus on the definitions and approaches of interculturality using the theory of enunciation (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1999). The presence of *deictiques* or shifters used by participants does not refer to the independent meaning of the word itself but refer to their utterances that depend on a particular communicative situation. In this article, I will concentrate on the meaning of *here* vs. *there* and *I/we* vs. *they* which mark self-identification of one individual (Dervin, 2011) and often constitute an act of *Othering* (Dervin, 2007a) by generalizing and stereotyping individuals. In addition, the different references of the shifter *we* (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2009, p. 46) will be highlighted in this article.

In order to disclose several layers of individuals, I will also employ the theory of *Mixed Intersubjectivity* (MI) (Dervin, 2013). Many studies about culture or interculturality focus on the surface of discourse and seek to find out evidences of culture. Based on the MI theory, discourse is not identified as discourse only, but also as a process to construct oneself. The discovery of their visible and invisible voice via the presence of “identifiable others”, “unidentifiable others”, “‘real’ interlocutors”, “self/selves” and “hidden self/selves” allows me to understand the participants better (Ibid., p. 8). By understanding the existence of different voices among speakers, one could get a better understanding of the way lecturers position themselves.

Analysis of the Data

Confusing Interculturality and Culture

The prefix *inter-* in the term *intercultural* indicates a relation and interaction between individuals, groups and identities (Abdallah-Preteuille, 2011). For Allwood (1985), *intercultural* implies an interaction between people of different cultural backgrounds. However, I would prefer to define it as an interaction between people with different mother tongues, which is more fluid and does not limit communication to nationality or culture. Participants in this research study do not seem to agree on the meaning of interculturality which is often reduced to cultural skills or knowledge. NNL8 shows for example a very

static approach to the term in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 1:

INT: Do you think that intercultural skills are important for students?

NNL8: **Cultural skills**, what you mean that they learn about culture?

INT: Intercultural... is... they interact with... like the French students interact with native speakers or French speakers.

NNL8: Yes, because when *you* learn a language, *you* learn the culture. Culture is part of the language. And nowadays, *we* know that *we* can't learn a language without learning the culture. **Culture is in everything**. [...] so intercultural is very important now because **it's like** when *we* talk about intercultural, **it's to** put oneself in another person's shoes to understand, to see how *they* view things. **It's not only** to understand, but *we* put ourselves in *them* to understand the culture. So **it is very important with globalisation**, way by this in communication, ok, it's not more like learning a language just to tourism, ok now it's *you* learn a foreign language so that *you* can work with the language, you can with *the people of that language*. [...]

[Italics and emphasis are mine]

When INT asks a question about intercultural skills, NNL8 ignores the existence of the prefix *inter-* and reframes the concept, narrowing its scope to “cultural” skills. INT notices it and tries to move away from the purely cultural approach to ensure that there is no misunderstanding on the question. Yet, NNL8 insists on her/his point of view by highlighting the connection between culture and language, s/he believes that culture and language are interrelated and cannot be separated. The idea of interaction completely disappears to give way to a sort of cultural knowledge associated with a particular language.

NNL8 also raises an interesting point by saying that learning a foreign language enables a person to work with “the people of the language”, where language only seems to be used with native speakers. However, a language can often be used as a lingua franca or a vehicular language between speakers of different mother tongues which makes interaction between non-native speakers or between non-native speakers and native-speakers possible. This can be observed on a daily basis in Malaysia where Malay is for example used between Chinese and Malay speakers, and English is often used as a lingua franca among speakers of different languages.

During the interview, NNL8 uses many shifters with a different meaning every time. The first occurrence of *you* (= anyone) makes the speakers become “unidentifiable” (Dervin, 2013). According to NNL8, it is a must for anyone who learns a new/foreign language to learn the culture of that language; moreover, NNL8 indicates that learning a new language without learning its culture is unacceptable and this shows a mono-cultural understanding of the term (one language, one culture). Further in the excerpt, NNL8 uses *we* as an identifiable marker when s/he says “*we* know that...”, s/he intends to strengthen her/his discourse behind the voice of lecturers and underlines that s/he is not the only one having this opinion. NNL8 is trying to generalise her/his point of view by assuming that her/his idea is the same as other lecturers' and that s/he is echoing the discourse on culture teaching s/he believes universal. In the same sentence, another occurrence of *we* (“...*we* can't learn a language without learning the culture”), refers this time to students

who learn a foreign language. Indeed while NNL8 is generalising students, s/he is trying to place herself/himself in the position of the “agent” (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000) of the interview and demonstrates her /his institutional power: s/he is indeed lecturing INT whom s/he regards as a student rather than a peer or an interviewer, stressing an obvious power relation.

By the opposition between *we/they*, NNL8 is actually othering (Dervin, 2007a) herself/himself from the native speakers. S/he connects many items to “culture” without defining it and in her/his discourse, the term “intercultural” is taken for granted and has an empty meaning (Tournebise, 2012). Through excerpt 1, NNL8 holds a solid view on intercultural communication exhibiting the tendency to recognise individuals only within national boundaries, forgetting the Malaysian multicultural context. This tendency is not specific to non-native lecturers and it can also be noticed in the discourse of native speakers as well, as excerpt 2 shows:

Excerpt 2:

INT: How do you teach intercultural skills to students?

NL1: I ask the students how **Malaysians do**, because maybe I observe things, but maybe I did not analyse them properly. So basically, when I think something is different, I would always try to just point to the direction of **what we are doing in France**, and then ask the students **if that the same things in Malaysia** or it doesn't mean the same thing. Does it have the same integration? And then I let the students explain to me **what it means in Malaysian culture**. And then we try to meet some more in between, between **what it means for the French culture**, **what it means for the Malaysian culture** [...]

When INT asks a question about teaching intercultural skills to NL1, s/he tries to self-identify and represent speakers of another language at a national level thus showing a very static approach. NL1 describes the ways s/he teaches by clearly making an opposition between “*in France*”/“*in Malaysia*” and “*French*”/“*Malaysian*” during the interview. Excerpt 2 shows that NL1 uses comparisons to teach “intercultural” skills, showing again that the interactional aspect of interculturality is not taken into consideration. “Cultures” are assumed to be homogeneous (i.e. what *they do there* vs. what *Malaysians do here*) and the word “intercultural” does not carry any impact on the space and time of the interaction. NL1 ignores or maybe did not realise the presence of the prefix “*inter-*”, cultures appear in contrast with one another (similarity and difference between countries), and the stereotypes of an “imagined culture” (Dervin, 2007b) are conveyed in the classroom. NL1 categorises individuals in two national groups (*French/Malaysians*) and differentiates behaviour/action/thinking based on national lines, inscribing individuals in two homogenous categories. The notion of identity does not surpass the level of an atemporal, ubiquitous culturalism.

In certain cases, lecturers would move away from a solid approach towards a liquid approach, yet the transformation would still remain incomplete. The following excerpt is typically Janusian; confusion does not only exist on the understanding of interculturality, but a blurred line also appears between interculturality and culture. Like when lecturers define interculturality without *inter-*, interculturality is treated here as culture, while NL2 tends to have a less radical discourse.

Excerpt 3:

INT: Do you think students have adequate intercultural skills?

NL2: I don't think anyone ever has adequate intercultural skills because **it is something that is not set; there is something that is changing**, something that evolve through changing culture and society, and **something that you need to practise**, something that you need to experience, you can try to learn it, **but I don't think that *students* can grasp it sufficiently**.

When INT asks NL2 about intercultural skills, NL2 claims that intercultural skills are not fixed and keep changing. Here, NL2 expresses a liquid point of view, emphasizing the dynamics of intercultural skills and the importance of real interactions. However, NL2 has the tendency to demonstrate her/his power from her/his institutional background and opposes lecturers and students in a clear hierarchy. S/he assumes that students cannot grasp interculturality sufficiently although they experience it. At the same time, s/he implies that a lecturer is different from a student, that a lecturer would be able to do what a student can't, and individuals are once again seen as categories, though different ones. This is in contrast with the liquid approach s/he holds earlier on. Intercultural communication is like a platform where the speakers meet to interact with each other; students as well as lecturers need to proceed to the core when communication is in process even if the lecturers may be more experienced. The final remark of NL2 gives the idea that interculturality is something more or less solid which you can "grasp" contradicting the first liquid assertion of NL2. You can "grasp" a solid object that you would keep, but not something liquid like interculturality that needs to be renegotiated every time, depending on the context.

Normality and taboos and as cultural prescriptions

The French anthropologist Marc Augé (2010) warns us against a tendency to overgeneralise. There is a big risk, he writes, that the description done in ethnographic studies in particular contexts would be accepted as the norm of this particular society, especially by readers who are not familiar with the context. The norm becomes then a sort of expectation for the lay person and the idea of certain *normality* in a particular culture may be conveyed by previous readings or teachings. The following experience of a non-native lecturer when studying in France gives us an example of the persistence of expected stereotypes in relation with a former training:

Excerpt 4

NNL1: [...] **Normally *you* have the idea** from books, the French drink coffee, milk and coffee, café au lait and toasts. **That / experienced the first time** when I was there. *You* have a bowl of... coffee, a big bowl like that, *you* pour coffee and *you* pour milk! [...] **But there are others who also** take cereals. [...] **The parents do not just take the normal...** milk and coffee, café au lait and toasts.

The references of both shifters *you* are "unidentifiable" (Dervin, 2013). The exact person NNL1 refers to cannot be identified, but a difference between the first and the second occurrence of *you* may be noted. In the first case ("Normally *you* have the idea..."), *you* refers to anyone who has the stereotypes of French food before s/he goes to France, most probably through teaching materials which emphasize a lot on, for example, *croissants* or

the *baguette* (French loaf). The next occurrence is related to the persons NNL1 met when s/he went to France. At first, NNL1 speaks of the ways other people view in a solid approach (“**The French** have coffee and toasts for **their** breakfast”), and after that s/he voices out her/his own more liquid view resulting from her/his experience. Stereotypes of “normal” French breakfast and food are common in teaching methods: the French loaf and the three course meals definitively contribute to a certain image of France which French politicians cultivate (see the inscription of *French cuisine* to the UNESCO’s world heritage). The central role of this lecturer’s earlier teachers who exposed her/him to solidifying teaching materials can still be noticed in the way s/he started her/his French experience, rising overgeneralising expectations.

The solid approach can lead in certain cases to a fear of clashes due to ‘cultural difference’. The following excerpt is related to taboos. NNL2 chose to look for basic knowledge about taboos of the other party hoping to get an idea of the cultural (indeed national) identity of French and having a smoother communication with her/his interlocutors. However Augé (2010) reminds us how taboos were described by anthropologists to be conveniently used by the Hawaiian authorities in the 18th century in order to develop business in their favour.

Excerpt 5:

NNL2: Especially when you are dealing with **foreign students** or with different cultures. Cause **you don’t want to make a, what you shouldn’t say and you say, what is not acceptable**, you don’t know and you do it, maybe it will affect or offend the other party. So at least you understand roughly **what is acceptable, what is not acceptable, what is the disgust, what are not the disgusts**, so then you **avoid those topics**. So at least you don’t create fiction or misunderstanding or you offend the *other party*.

NNL2 believes that the best way to avoid misunderstandings in communication would be to do some ‘homework’ about the culture generally associated with the language. S/he thinks that a good intercultural communication can only occur if speakers do not “offend” the other parties and s/he advocates that intercultural communication should be conducted with the basic knowledge of *what to do/not to do* (what you should/shouldn’t say, what is acceptable/not acceptable, and what is disgusting/not disgusting). Intercultural interactions are seen as potentially conflicting and the role of a lecturer would thus be to train students how to “save face” (Goffman, 1974; Mao, 1994), or more exactly, not to commit any *face threatening acts* (FTA) i.e. “acts and strategies which could harm or threaten the positive or negative face of one’s interlocutors” (Brown and Levinson, 1978 & 1987).

The concept of *face* comes from China and refers to politeness when interacting with another speaker. In a desire to save her/his interlocutor’s face in accordance with her/his own representations of her/his culture, s/he would confine her/his interlocutor in an “imagined culture”. By listing what *to do/not to do*, NNL2 supposes that the basic knowledge about taboos can be helpful to understand everyone from the ‘addressed national group’ and that people need to make adjustments before the communication, for example avoiding some of the topics/actions that would create some kind of discomfort with the cultural Other. Individuals are once again put in a cultural category associated with their nationality. The concept of *taboo* as used here is highly culturalist, because it

assigns individuals a fixed cultural identity (Machart & Lim, 2013c).

Conclusion

The results of this study are based on the interviews of 12 participants who teach French in the BA programmes in Malaysia. I do not assume that they are characteristic of lecturers teaching other foreign languages in Malaysia, or in any other context. In fact, by using a dynamic approach, I focused on the way they present their points of view rather than their representations of the object (Dervin, 2013).

Participants widely refer to the solid approach in their definition of the concepts or on the way to develop intercultural skills, may they be native or non-native speakers of the language concerned. Their origin, their personal experiences (all NL have been posted in Malaysia for more than 8 years at the time of the interview) and their former training (in Europe and/or in Malaysia) seem to have no impact on their representation of interculturality. Some participants assume that having a basic knowledge on taboos is an essential intercultural skill in order for language learners to have better interactions with speakers of the language learned or they believe that misunderstandings and *faux pas* can be avoided when adjustments are made along the dichotomy on *what to do/not to do*. Interculturality is viewed as a confrontation between solid objects whose characteristics can be learned, understood and finally grasped for smoother interactions.

Most participants were not only homogenising the ‘target culture’ but also the ‘source culture’ during the interviews. For example, in excerpt 1, the systematic use of *we* in opposition to *they* shows a tendency to acknowledge the univocity of the “French culture”, potentially inferior or superior to hers/his. The interviewees expressed the idea that the learners have to try their best to learn the target language and at the same time ‘copy’ or fit into the cultural context of target language. Excerpt 2 also reveals the use of a comparison technique to teach “interculturality” and the lecturer guides the learners to oppose the source and target country (*in Malaysia vs. in France*).

As a matter of fact, most participants do not take either learners' former languages or Malaysia's multilingual/multicultural context into consideration and the teaching of intercultural skills becomes artificially binary: Malaysians appear as monocultural, are assigned a single (national) identity, and so do French speakers. Yet, most learners in Malaysia have acquired more than 2 languages and live in a linguistically and culturally diverse environment. The current language (French) is a L3, a L4 or even a L5 for some learners, after at least their first language and English. The teaching of languages and the associated development of intercultural skills looks like a succession of the learning of discrete cultures that must be gained one by one, instead of a move towards a ‘platform’ beyond cultural boundaries. The learning process becomes thus repetitive while a more fluid and dynamic teaching approach would benefit students and lecturers to help them interact with speakers of any other language.

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