



## INNOVATIVE EDUCATION FOR A MORE TOLERANT SOCIETY

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**ABSTRACT:** *Social issues need to be addressed within education systems in the world to combat the 'dangers' associated with simplistic binary logic. Language teachers, in this regard, have a good chance of elevating tolerance of difference through analysis of culture and explorations of shared traits and potentialities between 'Self' and 'Other'. This paper reviews some related literature to develop strategies for promoting tolerance that offers benefits for society in terms of social cohesion, while challenging intolerance of difference in the form of simplistic binary logic and encourages critical thinking. The paper essentially suggests that dialogism and respect for alternative voices should be practiced in classrooms. (Language) teachers should create a social environment in classrooms that is conducive to students feeling able to express alternative views where those views will be heard and considered. If students are to be responsible members of society and agents of change for a better world, they need to be equipped with a sufficient understanding of other cultures and constructive engagement in the dialogic and intercultural spaces, as recommended by Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva.*

**KEYWORDS:** Binary Logic, Dialogism, Tolerance, Difference, Imagination

### INTRODUCTION

Education systems in various countries are often called upon by governments to address social issues. Whilst this makes the work of educators increasingly complex, education has an important role to play in combating the dangers associated with simplistic binary logic, as manifest in extreme views. I have argued elsewhere (Welsh 2011, 2014; Welsh & Kostogriz 2015) that language educators have an important opportunity to promote tolerance of difference, where teachers of a 'foreign' language are well-placed to critically analyse the concept of culture and to explore shared traits and potentialities between self and other, rather than to focus on differences. Even the word 'foreign' in 'foreign languages' is loaded with assumptions of difference that risks fuelling binary thinking. When applied to people, binary thinking is dangerous as it tends to place the self above the other, which risks demonising others.

Attitudes towards other groups of people are often characterised by a binary logic based on difference between the Self and Other. This logic is often used to generate identity positions by

contrasting the Self with 'Otherness', where the Self is what the Other is not, and the Other is what the Self is not. Defining identity through difference, readily leads to acts of 'Othering' where 'others' who differ from 'us' are viewed as inferior. Various points of difference can be made between self and other, such as ethnicity, culture, religion, sexual orientation, opinions or even which football team one supports. The creation of identity positions through points of difference is very common and readily frames a divide between 'us' and 'them'. The prevalence for people to engage in 'othering' is readily exploited by populist politicians, conservatives and extremists, where binary logic produces polarised and essentialised extreme reactions such as agree or disagree, like or dislike and love or hate.

A binary logic of difference usually positions the self as normal and the other as abnormal, where the self is inherently positive and the other negative. This may play out through many different traits such as right and wrong, polite and rude, moral and immoral, and so on. In forming attitudes, binary logic is often referred to as black-and-white thinking, where the position of self and other are at opposite ends of a continuum portraying an issue or trait. Binary logic

represents simplistic thinking that ignores nuanced complexities of the real world. It overlooks possible alternatives between black-and-white extremities.

Language teaching and learning is a rich context in which to critically analyse culture as a point of division, yet the implications extend far beyond the language classroom. In this paper, I broaden discussion beyond the context of language teaching to argue that opportunities exist for all educators to challenge inherent intolerance of difference. In discussing how education can promote tolerance, I draw from the work of Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, in particular the concepts of outsidedness and dialogism. Successfully promoting tolerance offers obvious benefits for society in terms of social cohesion, while challenging intolerance of difference in the form of binary thinking challenges simplistic logic and promotes critical thinking. It enables students to see the world in a more holistic way - more as a complex array of cultural interconnections, rather than as a collection of different sets of cultural norms that operate in isolation.

## DIFFERENCES OF 'THE OTHER' DIFFERENCES OF 'THE OTHER'

The psycho-analyst and philosopher, Julia Kristeva (1991), discusses how differences between people are commonly viewed where 'the other' is regarded as being a stranger or foreigner. When confronted with otherness, Kristeva argues that the self typically responds in one of two possible ways - by either trying to assimilate otherness or repress it. If the other is perceived as being sufficiently similar it can be seen as equal, thereby reflecting a logic of assimilation. However, if differences of the other are perceived as not able to be assimilated, then the difference of the other is regarded as being inferior. This kind of reaction reflects a logic of repression (Barclay, 2010; Kristeva, 1991), where a binary logic of opposites is demonstrated. This kind of binary logic is a common instinctive reaction towards difference, but one that reflects an essentialist view of the other. (Mundiri, 2016)

For many conservatives, identifying with 'the Other' is perceived as a threat to the identity of the collective self. Such fears may be imagined and clearly reflect an essentialist, binary logic of exclusivity between 'us' and 'them'. Binary logic is readily exploited by populist politicians and nationalistic sentiment with common accusations directed at opponents who embrace 'foreign' attributes which supposedly reflect a lack of respect for one's own country and culture. Such calls demand people to unify or to be as one. Yet collective citizens of any nation demonstrate inherent diversity, so it is illogically simplistic to assume there is a total 'sameness' among a nations' citizens. Assumptions of 'sameness' is what Benedict Anderson (1991) refers

to in his theory of a nation state as being an imagined community. Demands to be the same are often based on simplistic binary logic and assumptions that cultures are static and mutually exclusive. This kind of thinking engages stereotyping and seeks to repress the Other. (H. Baharun & Mundiri, 2011)

In addressing the binary logic of difference and to overcome a repressive stance towards otherness, Kristeva (1991) proposes a concept of in-between-ness. She argues that the self recognises foreign traits of another culture not because it is foreign to the self but because it is within the self, but has been repressed. Kristeva argues for a 'polymorphic' culture, where people must account for otherness within the self. Rather than assimilating otherness, Kristeva's approach enables distinct boundaries between self and other to be dissolved. This a cosmopolitan cultural space of 'in-between-ness', where we are called to respect and welcome the stranger within us, which enables us to also welcome the Other.

## BAKHTIN'S DIALOGISM

In articulating the concept of dialogism, the Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin, makes a profound contribution to a better understanding of how the self relates to a cultural Other. Bakhtin (1981) argues that outsidedness enables one to see the self from the outside, as others do. This is an act of critical thinking and self-reflexivity where one imagines how he or she is perceived by others. It is a productive act that allows the self to consider alternative voices and to interact with the Other dynamically. Bakhtin proposes outsidedness as a vital part of dialogism, where outsidedness enables us to critically look at ourselves differently, from the perspective of the Other, and to generate new identity positions in intercultural spaces.

The potential to engage multiple identity positions is implicit in Bakhtin's argument for the need to maintain one's own unique place, yet at the same time to co-experience Otherness (Brandist, 2002). Co-experiencing Otherness can take the form of intercultural interaction, as in Bakhtin's dialogism, where entities can retain their unique identities yet, through interaction with the Other, can also engage another shared identity position. Bakhtin's idea of dialogism is interaction based on the understanding that the Other and Self are equal yet different. In this way, Bakhtin's dialogism enables ethical intercultural acts that recognise equality despite differences. This represents an ethical response to difference where the aim is not to assimilate or repress the Other, but to engage in a way that values the Other, whilst not denying the Self. (H. Baharun, 2016)

By engaging dialogism, an ethical act is made possible to achieve what Kristeva (1991) refers to as in-between-ness, that is, a generative space for

transformative relations between Self and Other. The in-between-ness of interculturality is achieved through dialogism (Bakhtin 1981). Dialogic acts where both self and other are afforded a voice, provide the transformational stepping stones for language learners to become what Kramsch (2009) refers to as intercultural speakers.

## **THE ROLE OF TEACHERS**

There is a growing body of research work promoting intercultural dialogue in education. Much of this has been produced in the field of language education, but the principles can be similarly applied to many areas of education. The practice of dialogic intercultural encounters in the classroom includes critical thinking, and positions the teacher as modeller (Kramsch, 2009), as advocate for the Other's culture (Lo Bianco, 2009) and mediator of intercultural engagement (Liddicoat & Kohler, 2012). Teachers need to present a range of alternative 'voices' in the form of points of view, that can be regarded as representing Otherness. It is important to mediate students' views and to help raise awareness of Otherness. This can be done by providing alternative views and by modelling a world view where things are unfinalised and evolving. Holliday (2011) advocates for the concept of critical cosmopolitanism, which involves a concept of culture where diversity is normal, where cultural boundaries may be unclear and dynamic, and where all sides adopt a critical outlook. This helps project a view of culture consistent with what Liddicoat (2002) refers to as dynamic and what Holliday (2011) refers to as non-essentialist. (Mundiri & Zahra, 2017)

Rather than teachers merely projecting their own views, or a particular set of values, as complete and absolute, and trying to impose them on students, teachers need to recognise the importance of developing a balanced appreciation of a multiplicity of alternative positions that can be negotiated during interaction with others. This can occur not only through direct social interaction with the cultural Other, but also through intercultural engagement in classroom discussion. Identifying different ideas, points of view and attitudes can be an important first step in recognising different identity positions of different cultures. Yet, this alone risks stereotyping and essentialising the cultural other. The next important step for more meaningful and respectful intercultural engagement is to consider commonalities between cultural groups and to negotiate new shared understandings and values. Such acts can create new and dynamic intercultural identity positions of shared meaning. In this way, teachers can model an open-minded world view and at the same time mediate how students see the cultural Other, as is advocated by Liddicoat and Kohler (2012).

Teachers face a difficult balance in having to challenge over-generalisations, negative stereotypes

and discriminatory views. This should be done in a way that demonstrates a sensitive balance and openness to alternative views, whilst also being aware of ethical boundaries. There is tension between accepting all other positions as equally valid and judging certain positions or views as being unacceptable. This is where teachers' professional and moral judgement is needed to negotiate and raise awareness of the ethical and moral values of different positions. Before judging a position is morally acceptable or not, it is important to hear and consider a range of views as part of the process of forming judgement. This is where class discussion can be highly valuable to share a range of alternative views, to demonstrate respect for difference, to explore cultural norms, and to develop critical thinking.

## **CONCLUSION**

Imagination plays an important role in intercultural dynamics. Bakhtin's (1981) notion of dialogism means that the call to respond to the Other does not merely refer to the other we face in the immediate moment, but extends to the unseen Other, including voices of the past and future. We are challenged to imagine how the Other might respond, think or act in particular situations. There is a multiplicity of possibilities, as we view others at an individual and collective level who are capable of exerting agency and divergent views, rather than merely representing an essentialised static single position. Respect for different opinions reflects an ethical response to others. Dialogism as conceptualised by Bakhtin is grounded in relational processes and involves critical thinking to consider and negotiate alternative voices.

Dialogism and respect for alternative voices should be practiced in classrooms. This means teachers need to model not only tolerance but also curiosity to alternative points of view. It is important to create a social environment in classrooms that is conducive to students feeling able to express alternative views where those views will be heard and considered. Modelling by teachers is a vital step, but modelling alone is an incomplete pedagogical approach. Teachers also need to mediate binary logic that readily leads to extreme points of view. It is important that classroom activities are designed in a way that students are able to actively engage with, and seriously consider alternative viewpoints as being valid. If students are to become good global citizens and agents of transformational change for a better world, they will require an understanding of other cultures but more importantly they will also need to be able to engage constructively in the kind of dialogism of intercultural spaces, as envisaged by Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva.

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