

Foreign Language Education – some thoughts for teachers

It is now commonplace to see foreign language teaching policies – and some practice – acknowledging the fact that linguistic competence needs to be completed by intercultural competence. This is due in part to contemporary changes in communication and the opportunity for international travel, and in part to the presence of many different ethnic and national groups in contemporary societies. Linguistic and intercultural competence are as important for communication within societies as across geographical and social borders. With this starting point, I will suggest that language teaching has inevitable political characteristics, and is not only a matter of developing intercultural skills. A model for intercultural teaching therefore needs to include educational objectives and requires an explicit and conscious understanding on the part of teachers of the educational role of language teaching. I shall, second, suggest that ‘education’ in this context is a matter of developing critical thinking in learners, with the consequence that they become active in society, a view which could and should be shared across subjects and disciplines. Finally, I will argue that foreign language education has some specific characteristics – including making judgements about other people’s values and our own – which mean that language teachers need to think carefully about the universality or relativity of values, so that they are properly equipped for their work with learners.