Using picture story books to enact the Australian Curriculum Languages

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Introduction

Planning, designing, developing and implementing a new curriculum is hard work. The reality for many Languages teachers in Australia is that they are one-person departments, particularly teachers working in primary schools (Liddicoat et al., 2007). In schools with larger Languages departments, there may only be a single (full-time) representative of a specific language. Therefore, the task of creating a new curriculum typically falls to a single Languages teacher. Further, the languages teacher is likely to be the only professional in the school with expertise in this learning area, so they cannot look to curriculum leaders or more senior colleagues for informed guidance. The release of the Australian Curriculum Languages in 2014 has prompted a new round of curriculum change, with which Languages must now engage. Indeed, the educational jurisdictions of most states and territories in Australia have either adopted or adapted the Australian Curriculum Languages (Australian Curriculum, Development and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2017a).

The curriculum reform literature indicates that curriculum change is a very difficult thing to achieve (Yates, 2011). Connor (2011) describes the negative effects of poor implementation strategies and Gilbert (2012) points out that effective curriculum reform is predicated on teachers having a clear understanding of both the theoretical underpinnings (what is it that we as teachers are trying to do and how is it different from what we’re doing now?) and the means by which the new curriculum can be delivered effectively (how do I teach this new material or in this new way?). This paper aims to address both of these precursors to effective curriculum reform.

This paper and the presentation on which it is based are intended for teachers who are in the position of having to engage with a new languages curriculum, possibly without access to optimal support. It describes an approach to languages curriculum renewal that is potentially relevant in any context but particularly so for teachers working within an intercultural language teaching framework. The paper is organized around the following key questions:

- How do I approach the new curriculum?
- What is the Australian Curriculum Languages (ACL)?
- How do I work with the ACL?
- What’s new about this curriculum?
- Why should I use picture story books to deliver the ACL?

Examples of classroom materials, particularly from Japanese units of work based on picture story books, have been used throughout to help bridge the theory–practice divide.

How do I approach the new curriculum?

When faced with the task of re-writing their curriculum, there are three approaches teachers might adopt. The first, and in my view least preferred, option is the one I have referred to as the ‘tinkering’ approach. It describes the situation where teachers make only cosmetic changes to
their current curriculum in response to a new curriculum initiative. In reference to curriculum reform in South Australia, Dellit described teachers who ‘had adopted [only] the rhetoric of reform’. They did not actually change their practice; rather, they changed ‘the ways that they explained what they were doing’ (Dellit, 2011, p. 158).

The second possible approach is captured by the ‘renovation’ metaphor. Here the teacher retains the best elements of the current curriculum or those elements that conform to the new curriculum. The decision regarding what changes to introduce would be governed by necessity (i.e. an aspect is not in the current curriculum) or elements of the new curriculum that would enhance the old curriculum. To illustrate using the renovation analogy, one might think of replacing an old bathroom and adding an outdoor deck.

This second ‘renovation’ option is realised through undertaking a careful audit of the current curriculum. For example, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA, 2017) has created online auditing tools for teachers to map their current units of work with reference to the new Victorian Curriculum, both against the content descriptions and the achievement standards (see below) for the relevant year levels. Analysing the results of this auditing process serves a number of functions. According to VCAA, teachers can:

- identify gaps or areas of ‘over teaching’;
- determine if there is sufficient time allocation relative to the aspect’s perceived importance and to enable learners to achieve the desired outcomes;
- evaluate current opportunities for learner growth and progression in the language.

Teachers adopting this approach might retain their current curriculum but add, remove or enhance elements. For example, teachers used to a target-language-only approach might not previously have included learning activities where learners develop an understanding of the issues around translation called for in the new ACL. In my own practice, my reception level learners enjoyed the German version of the picture story book *Maisy’s Bedtime* (Cousins, 1999; Cousins, 2004). They were intrigued as to why the main character (Mausi) and her friends had different names in the German version. After having engaged with the ACL, I can now imagine a whole class discussion around translations, name selection, identity and English/German pronunciation of common names. The discussion would presumably be expanded and enhanced by inclusion of other languages known to the learners.

The third response to a new curriculum initiative might be referred to metaphorically as the ‘launch pad’ approach. Here teachers could see the introduction of a new curriculum framework as a catalyst to create completely new learning experiences for their students. Teachers might take inspiration from a new element such as the ‘Creating’ sub-strand of the ACL and develop a common thread in their new curriculum around a genre such as poetry. Students in Years 7–10 would explore and experiment with different forms of Japanese poetry such as *haiku*, *renge*, *waka* and *iroha mokigusari* as they progress through the school.

Within this third approach to curriculum renewal, the Languages teacher is relatively free to develop worthwhile units of work that meet the needs and interests of the learners. Detailed reference to the source curriculum occurs after the first draft of the unit of work. At this stage, links are identified with the source curriculum and any necessary modifications to the units of work made to ensure it reflects the outcomes of the new curriculum. However, as noted earlier, the creation of new units of work which are securely and coherently located within the new curriculum framework necessitates Languages teachers being familiar with the design, detail and expectations of the new curriculum as well as its theoretical underpinnings. To this end, the next sections describe the ACL and the theory of language teaching it is predicated on.
What is the Australian Curriculum Languages (ACL)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRAND</th>
<th>SUB-STRAND</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communicating</td>
<td>1.1 Socialising</td>
<td>Interacting orally and in writing to exchange ideas, opinions, experiences, thoughts and feelings; and participating in planning, negotiating, deciding and taking action.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1.2 Informing</td>
<td>Obtaining, processing, interpreting and conveying information through a range of oral, written and multimodal texts; developing and applying knowledge.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.3 Creating</td>
<td>Engaging with imaginative experience by participating in, responding to and creating a range of texts, such as stories, songs, drama and music.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.4 Translating</td>
<td>Moving between languages and cultures orally and in writing, recognising different interpretations and explaining these to others.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.5 Reflecting</td>
<td>Participating in intercultural exchange, questioning reactions and assumptions; and considering how interaction shapes communication and identity.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understanding</th>
<th>2.1 Systems of language</th>
<th>Understanding language as a system, including sound, writing, grammatical and textual conventions.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2 Language variation and change</td>
<td>Understanding how languages vary in use (register, style, standard and non-standard varieties) and change over time and place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.3 The role of language and culture</td>
<td>Analysing and understanding the role of language and culture in the exchange of meaning.</td>
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Table 1. Australian Curriculum Languages Structure (ACARA, 2017b)

Language-specific curricula for the Australian Curriculum Languages learning area have been written for 14 languages: Arabic, Auslan, Chinese, French, German, Hindi, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Modern Greek, Spanish, Turkish and Vietnamese. Frameworks have also been provided for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages and Classical languages. All of the ACL language-specific curricula are organized in the same way. There are generic Introduction, Rationale, Aims and Key ideas sections. Then for each language there is a unique Context statement followed by a Band description encompassing one of 5 levels between Foundation and Year 10, a description of the mandatory content to be taught and a two-paragraph description of the Achievement standard to be realised by learners within the specified band period. The description of the content is organized into two strands, communicating and understanding, which are further sub-divided into 8 sub-strands. Table 1 above provides a brief description of the strands and sub-strands for all languages except Auslan, which has additional sub-strands.
Content descriptions represent the compulsory skills, knowledge and understandings that students should acquire at different levels of schooling (bands). Each of the sub-strands has at least one content description for each band. Each content description is accompanied by multiple content elaborations, which are examples of possible learning activities that would enable students to achieve the content described. The content elaborations are not compulsory, although the target language examples included in the elaborations provide teachers with a sense of expected level. The achievement standards share a common format. They are two paragraphs in length; the first paragraph refers to the communication strand and the second paragraph refers to the understanding strand.

Two curricula exist for each language except Chinese, which has five different curricula. The two curricula reflect different starting points: Foundation to Year 10 and Year 7 to Year 10. The achievement standards for the two sequences of learning are different between the two pathways. There are some differences to note between different languages in the ACL. In all languages except Chinese, the curricula are written for either second language (L2) learners or background learners. In the case of Chinese, curricula exist for L2, background and L1 learners; for the last of these, a curriculum exists for the Year 7–10 sequence only.

How do I work with the ACL?

The strands and sub-strands of the ACL are not intended to be delivered separately. For example, given a single learning intention such as learning to express quantity, the F–Year 2 band of the ACL Japanese (ACARA 2017d) might involve the 5 sub-strands of ‘Informing’ (i.e. saying how many people in their family, how many objects they see in a picture), ‘Translating’ (saying numbers in other languages they know), ‘Reflecting’ (on how English and Japanese ways of counting differ, and on learning a new script (kanji) to represent numbers), ‘Systems of language’ (counters), and ‘Language variation and change’ (how the nature of the object counted impacts on vocabulary and grammatical choices). Other sub-strands might come into play depending on the context chosen to achieve the learning outcome. For example, learning a Japanese number rhyme or song involving numbers or playing Bingo could incorporate the ‘Creating’ and ‘Socialising’ sub-strands. Thus, one important point to note is that a single learning activity can be used to deliver content descriptions from multiple sub-strands. When designing units of work, teachers work vertically with the ACL, integrating the sub-strands as appropriate.

From the example given above, it is also clear that the ACL is a framework and not a syllabus. The Content descriptions and Achievement standards for each language are very broadly expressed and thereby afford teachers significant flexibility in the design and delivery of their language programs. Some Languages teachers rely on textbooks to structure their programs, using chapters as de facto units of curriculum. If this is not possible or desirable, the question of selecting curriculum organizing units is then germane when using the ACL. Traditionally topics, themes and units of inquiry are other curriculum units commonly used in the development of language syllabuses, particularly at the primary level. The Australian Curriculum Languages: Foundation to Year 10 Curriculum Design document (ACARA 2014) outlines the importance of basing units of work around ‘concepts’ because they ‘lend themselves more fruitfully to intercultural comparison and engage learners in personal reflection and more substantive learning’ (p. 12). Scarino and Liddicoat (2009) and others (e.g. Nunan, 2004) advocate the use of tasks as curriculum units.
In this paper, the picture story book is suggested as a possible frame for student learning. Picture story books can serve as useful curriculum-organizing units because they give learning activities coherence by relating them to the book in some way. A recently published Indonesian unit created for an EAL and Languages project (Slaughter & Truckenbrodt, 2016; Slaughter et al., 2016) illustrates this strategy. The selection of the focus language features (e.g. negation using tidak/buah, and the verbs saya, ‘to like’, and makan, ‘to eat’), texts (e.g. a days-of-the-week song), a fruit diary, and learning experiences (e.g. tasting and recording fruit preferences) all related back to the source picture story book (Dua Orang Utan Yang Lucu Sekali).

It is important to note that picture story books as curriculum units do not preclude the use of concepts or tasks. Picture books can be readily used for the exploration of concepts or inquiry questions, and also provide a stimulus for authentic tasks. Liauw et al. (2014) created a unit of work which utilised a picture story book version of the Japanese fable ‘The Mouse’s Marriage’ to inform learners’ response to the inquiry questions: How do people celebrate weddings in Australia and Japan? and What does literature tell us about how people choose a life partner? The concepts of ‘celebration’, ‘relationships’ or ‘traditions’ (ACARA, 2014, p. 13) could also have been explored through this text. Similarly, the ‘Mottainai Grandma text (Shinju, 2005) could be the catalyst for a whole-school investigation into waste reduction strategies.

What’s new about the ACL?

The potentially new and challenging aspect of the ACL is that it is located within the intercultural language teaching space. Intercultural language teaching (IcLT) has been advocated for and delivered for at least 20 years, but an agreed and accessible representation of its principles remains elusive. The language teacher reference literature (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Richards & Rodgers, 2014) provides historical overviews of different language teaching methods and approaches used up to the present day, but IcLT is not described. Brown and Lee (2015) have a chapter devoted to the cultural and sociopolitical contexts of language teaching but describe intercultural competence in two paragraphs (at 167) with no direction on how it is to be achieved.

Scarino and Liddicoat (2009) reject reductionist, simplistic ‘methodological prescriptions’ of IcLT. They call instead for languages teachers to adopt a personal, professional ‘stance’ that is constantly evolving. They argue that this is necessary given the complex and dynamic nature of ‘using language and languages in our multilingual and multicultural world’ (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009, 5). Difficulties in realising IcLT in practice are therefore not unexpected. Diaz (2012) identified obstacles to engagement with intercultural language teaching which include ‘the lack of clear understanding of the language and culture nexus’, the continued focus on linguistic competence and ad hoc and incidental incorporation of cultural aspects into languages teaching (p. 33). Thus, if teachers want to use the advent of the ACL as a catalyst to be creative and to design new units of work reflecting an intercultural stance (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Kramsch, 1997), they need to understand IcLT well enough to integrate it into their current pedagogic stance. There are a growing number of teacher-friendly references teachers can access (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009; Australian Government Quality Teacher Program [AGQTP], 2007; Asian Languages Professional Learning Project [ALPLP], n.d.). However, the big ideas of intercultural language teaching such as ‘language’, ‘culture’ and ‘intercultural capability’ are captured in summary form in the ACL glossary (ACARA, 2017c), which is helpful for busy educators. From my perspective, these definitions of key concepts are useful starting points rather than reductionist over-simplifications. Here, for example, is the ACL definition of ‘language’, which either explicitly or implicitly informs all language teaching (Stern 1983).
Language
A human cognitive and communicative capability which makes it possible to communicate, to create and comprehend meaning, to build and sustain relationships, to represent and shape knowledge, and to imagine, analyse, express and evaluate.

Language is described and employed:
• as code - comprising systems, rules, a fixed body of knowledge; for example, grammar and vocabulary, sound and writing systems
• as social practice - used to do things, create relationships, interact with others, represent the world and the self; to organise social systems and practices in dynamic, variable, and changing ways
• as cultural and intercultural practice - means by which communities construct and express their experience, values, beliefs and aspirations
• as cognitive process - means by which ideas are shaped, knowledge is constructed, and analysis and reflection are structured

(ACARA 2017c)

Table 2 below describes possible language learning activities which reflect the different aspects of knowing and being able to use a language. It is not reductionist to use descriptions of key concepts to inform the selection and creation of appropriate learning tasks, texts and experiences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE</th>
<th>POSSIBLE LEARNING ACTIVITIES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>learning past tense verb forms, adverbs of time, narrative structure through engagement with Greek fables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social practice</td>
<td>introducing oneself to a class (mate) at a new school in Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural and intercultural practice</td>
<td>analysing the calendars of different cultural/linguistic groups, identifying and analysing important days and the underlying values (Different states/territories in Australia and Germany)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive process</td>
<td>describing and hypothesising about a book cover or an artwork using a See–Think–Wonder thinking routine</td>
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Table 2. Examples of learning activities illustrating the different aspects of the ACL definition of language.

Culture too is a broader concept within the ACL than the traditional Fs – food, facts, festivals, fashion and flags (Byrd, 2014). The ACL view of culture is as a ‘lens through which people see, think, interpret the world and experience […]’ (ACARA, 2017c). Importantly, whereas previously language study involved learning about the other, about ‘foreign’ cultures, within an intercultural framework both the familiar and new cultures are the objects of study. Scarino and Liddicoat (2009) describe learning to be intercultural as encompassing ‘learning to understand how one’s own culture shapes perceptions of oneself, of the world, and of our relationship to others’ (p. 21). In summary, teachers who are new to intercultural language learning would be well served by engaging with key terms of the ACL glossary.
Why should I use picture story books to deliver the ACL?

The use of literature in language learning has a long tradition, beginning with the study of Classical Latin and continued today in many university language departments (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Its continued use in modern language teaching is well supported in the research and professional literature (Leal, 2015; Morgan & Rinvolucri, 1983; Collie & Slater, 1997; Lazar, 1993; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). The rationale for the inclusion of literature in the form of picture story books in languages programs encompasses at least six main domains: linguistic, literacy, intercultural, social-emotional, knowledge and political.

Picture Story Books and Linguistic Competence
From a linguistic perspective, texts ‘are central to curriculum development as all work in language learning can be seen as textual work’ (ACARA, 2014, p.12). Pictures story books are samples of authentic language use. They are a particularly useful source of comprehensible linguistic input. The quantity of language is typically small and therefore manageable for beginning additional language learners; the number of words in picture story books is generally between poetry and short stories on the literary text continuum. The written text is supported by images, facilitating the making of meaning in the target language.

Wordless picture story books are also excellent learning tools for promoting language output such as in the co-construction of text (Early, 1991; Jalongo, 2002). Translations of familiar picture books enable learners to focus directly on the language since the content is known, and research by Sneddon (2009) supports the use of dual language books, particularly as tools to support learners’ home language.

Picture Story Books and Literacy Learning
Kern (2000) is a strong advocate for literacy-based language teaching. He argues that ‘foreign language learners can best begin their exploration of another language and culture by reading, discussing, and writing texts. He does not regard reading and writing simply as skills, but rather as ‘cognitive and social practices that provide learners access to new communities outside the classroom, across geographical and historical boundaries’ (Kern 2000, p. 303).

Picture story books are a staple in many homes and most primary classrooms; thus their use in a languages classroom provides an opportunity to simultaneously experience the familiar (picture books) and the unfamiliar – e.g. different text orientation (vertical, right to left), or different realisations of the same objects (e.g. Eric Hill’s character ‘Spot’ is ‘Flecki’ in German).

Finally, picture books are a recognised tool within a comprehensive first-language literacy program (e.g. Mallan, 2014). Using picture story books in the additional languages classroom provides learners with additional opportunities to practise and develop their literacy skills.

Picture Story Books and Intercultural Capability
According to Mallan, ‘[s]tory and storytelling are embedded practices in all cultures and have evolved over time from cave drawings to digital stories’ (Mallan 2014, p. 10). Allan describes stories around historic events (e.g. the Second World War) as ‘acts of remembrance’ or ‘textual monuments’ with particular ‘sticking power’ (Allan 2014, p. 16). They are cultural frames, acts of national identity which language learners need to understand as much as cultural practices like bowing and using chopsticks. The text Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes (Coerr, 1997) has provided a useful frame for Year 5 and 6 learners to look at the historical basis for Peace Day in Japan and identify similarities and differences with Anzac Day in Australia (Truckenbrodt & Payne, 2012).
Thus, picture story books can also be regarded as cultural artefacts. Picture books from the target culture may display overt cultural and linguistic differences through the directionality of the print, the orientation of the book, the subject matter and/or the illustrations. Mallan (2014) argues that learners ‘need to read other countries’ stories about national, personal and community identities to enlarge their cultural frames of reference and to reflect on how these stories share similarities and differences to their own’ (p. 6). Scarino and Liddicoat (2009, p. 35) identify five main principles for developing intercultural language learning:

- active construction
- making connections
- interaction
- reflection
- responsibility

All of these can be realised through the adoption of carefully selected picture story books. Reading stories in another language from another cultural group requires learners to be actively engaged in meaning-making; they notice and make connections with self, other texts and real-world experiences and interact with others about the language and the content. They reflect on their reactions to characters and events and may develop empathy with things which were previously unfamiliar (Mudiyanselage, 2014).

**Social and Emotional Learning and Picture Story Books**

Picture story books provide opportunities for social and emotional learning on at least three levels of engagement: with the content of the books, with their potential to connect and affirm learners’ identities and experiences, and as a stimulus to reflect on the L2 learning process. Picture story books, as examples of children’s literature, can ‘[develop] children’s ethical and empathic understanding of society and its people (Mallan, 2013, as cited in Mudiyanselage, 2014, p. 91). They offer a vicarious emotional experience suitable for young people about even challenging and confronting topics, such as the experience of Jewish children trapped in the Warsaw ghetto as portrayed in Hesse’s *The Cats in Kransinski Square* (Hesse, 2004). Given the multilingual, multicultural nature of Australian classrooms, picture books in other languages and about other cultures also have the potential to make all learners feel included in schooling, if their experiences and realities feature as part of the curriculum. Finally, the ‘Reflecting’ sub-strand of the ACL requires learners to think about their reactions to intercultural exchange and the process of communicating in another language. Content descriptions for Year 5 and 6 Japanese are given in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Year 5 & 6 Japanese Content descriptions for the sub-strand Reflecting](image-url)
The picture story book *My Two Blankets* (Kobald & Blackwood, 2014) or Judith Kerr’s fictionalised biography *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* (Kerr, 2009) are examples of texts which problematise the challenges of learning and using new languages. Either could serve as a stimulus to discuss the languages, communication and identity nexus central to the ACL.

**Acquiring Knowledge and Picture Books**

Fiction and non-fiction picture books can deliver new knowledge from other areas of the curriculum in accessible, engaging ways (e.g. Mallan & Cross, 2014; and Massey, 2014). They can be used to show different perspectives on the same event, such as the wombat’s and the humans’ perspectives on conservation (Frankel & Duncan, 2011, as cited in Massey, 2014); and Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* (Tan, 2006), a picture story book which illustrates the experience and impact of migration and is suitable for senior students and adults.

**Political Uses of Picture Books**

The hegemony of English and English literacy in the Australian educational context can marginalise other the learning and maintenance of other languages. Truckenbrodt and Slaughter (2016) have argued that a shared metalanguage and common classroom approaches to L1 and L2 language and literacy learning, appropriately nuanced and deployed, can break down the misconception that literacy resides exclusively in English and that meaning needs to be accessed via English. It is politically important that stakeholders understand that ‘literacy work’ is done in all areas of the curriculum but particularly through the learning of another language. When Languages and English/Classroom teachers can utilise the same tools of the trade, such as a picture story book, and support student learning through similar pedagogic practices, then the place of Languages in the curriculum may cease to be contested and might possibly be expanded.

**Concluding remarks**

This paper and the presentation it is based on was intended to encourage practising teachers to regard the advent of a new curriculum such as the Australian Curriculum Languages as a catalyst for positive change rather than an imposition. This paper familiarises teachers with the ACL framework and its theoretical underpinnings – intercultural language teaching – since these elements are regarded as essential for genuine curriculum change. I argue that a strong case can be made for the use of picture books to enact the ACL; the rationale for picture books encompasses more than the obvious linguistic, literacy and (inter)cultural reasons. Picture story books are an accessible, much-loved text type for learners and teachers. Using a picture story book as the starting point and frame for the design of a new unit of work is not only ‘doable’ for teachers but will also afford them more professional growth and satisfaction than simply tinkering with the current curriculum.
References


Mudiyanelage, K. D. (2014). ‘Encouraging Empathy through Picture Books about Migration’. In K. Mallan (Ed.), *Picture Books and Beyond* (pp. 75–91). Newtown, NSW: Primary English Teaching Association Australia.


