Foreword

Twenty years ago – roughly when the first edition of this book was published – the intellectual foundations of the field of intercultural language teaching were beginning to take shape; and this book has played a crucial role in bringing the field to maturity. With this second edition – and in its substantial additions – we can begin to see how the field has developed and changed, in no small part under its considerable influence.

A fundamental premise of the first edition was that how language works, how we make sense in language, how we mean things to each other – all take place within specific contexts. And in these contexts, cultures are in play as habitual patterns of interaction, routine forms of social practice, recurrent uses of symbol, sedimented frameworks of value and belief. As a dense backdrop, culture is implicated in every instance of language in use.

But if culture is a constant backdrop to the everyday use of language, how is it best to equip the learner with cultural knowledge – not just in terms of ‘knowing that...’, but also in terms of ‘knowing how to...’? For while any language as a code is finite, cultures are boundless and it is difficult to anticipate what features of context will be significant for communication – especially in intercultural contexts. The approach adopted by this book is to equip the learner with ways of analysing and interpreting culture but also to equip them with the ways of knowing how to negotiate the distance between their own culture and that of others. Fundamentally it provides the learner with methodologies for exploring cultural difference enabling them to explore their own culture as well as the target culture. For if we are to bridge the gap between our cultural origins and our destinations we need ways of observing, interpreting and understanding the cultures we encounter and the differences between them and our own.

This remains a fundamental foundational and guiding framework of intercultural approaches to language teaching. Nonetheless, in certain important respects the field has evolved and changed in ways that were difficult to anticipate but that this edition now charts and delineates. Perhaps the most important change lies in the way that the concept of culture
itself has been fundamentally re-inflected under the pressures of rapid social change. Even 20 years ago cultures were often still conceptualised and comprehended in broadly national terms as the whole way of life of a people (e.g. the French, the Chinese, the Vietnamese or the Welsh). But even 20 years ago this simple heuristic of a homogeneous national people was becoming destabilised. Most obviously it led to over-generalisations, oversimplifications and – worst of all – could tip into stereotyping.

Raymond Williams, one of the founding figures of what became known as cultural studies, famously commented that ‘culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language’ (1983: 87). And the last two decades have if anything only seen the concept become all the more complex. Perhaps the major complication lies in the scaling down of its range of application. It is more likely now to refer not to whole societies (or nations) but to smaller social units, subaltern groups, institutions and organisations. The role of culture in the formation of identity has received extra attention and emphasis: in complex societies the emphasis falls increasingly on the way many of us must transition – or ‘cross’ – between one identity and another and between one kind of cultural space and another. All of this only serves to increase the relevance of An Intercultural Approach to English Language Teaching. Scaling down how we think about the domains of culture only serves to increase how important are its implications: ‘culture is ordinary’, but it is also universally relevant.

At the same time – while culture was always a terrain of struggle – cultural divisions, especially, over the last decade, have if anything become quite deliberately accentuated. Culture becomes a foregrounded site of affiliation, rejection, explicit argument and contest. And this edition gives full recognition to these complexities, while remaining faithful to its founding insights. In particular, it takes the bold step of reflecting back on its own methods and methodologies, recognising that the classroom itself is a cultural context with its particular norms, values and forms of identity.

One final dimension that emerges strongly in this new edition may be summed up as the digitalisation of language and culture. Linguistic exchange, language and language learning all now take place not simply along the long-established modalities of speech and writing but online across the multimodal spaces of the internet. To be intercultural in the digital age requires the skills and ability to negotiate cultural difference across diverse modalities.

The new edition of An Intercultural Approach to English Language Teaching steers an admirably lucid and balanced course through the growing complexities of communication, culture, language and language learning in the digital age.

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