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Grassroots policymaking in practice: including heritage languages in the critical connections project through agency, activism, and alternative voices

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the Critical Connections Multilingual Digital Storytelling Project through the lens of Language Policy and Planning (LPP) and considers the situation of heritage language learning within the policy on language education. We present our project as grassroots policymaking in practice and demonstrate how, through deep and meaningful collaboration, researchers, teachers, parents/carers, and students can exercise bottom-up agency to address key issues in learning languages and developing multilingual literacy. Our interdisciplinary approach embeds interculturality within all stages of the language learning process creating spaces that foster empathy, activist citizenship, and possibilities for a more sustainable future. We interrogate our Critical Connections Project and argue that this approach to LPP provides an alternative model of interculturally oriented critical cosmopolitan education which validates multilingual identities. We show how digital technology, virtual communities, and a growing concern for social justice have shaped the project and discuss how we adopted a critical ethnographic approach. In looking at purposes, principles and means in our project, the digital stories themselves are analysed and presented as vibrant data. To conclude, we engage specifically with the implications of our research for heritage languages and LPP. Finally, we make a series of recommendations for heritage language planning and policy.

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Introduction

In this article, we consider the situation of heritage language learning within the policy on language education and how the Critical Connections project (Anderson & Macleroy, 2016; Anderson & Macleroy, 2021) improves provision for heritage language learners within an integrated approach to multilingualism. Some key questions posed in this article are:

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- How have changing conditions in the era of globalisation affected heritage language education?
- How has the place of bottom-up agency of (heritage language) educators come to assume greater importance in recent LPP research?
- How has the Critical Connections Project provided an alternative model of interculturally oriented critical cosmopolitan education which validates all forms of language learning and affirms multilingual identities?

By way of contextualisation for this article, we engage with new possibilities for heritage languages. We describe significant developments in language and culture learning under postmodern/late modern conditions focussing on (a) globalisation, transnational networks, and hybridity (b) the impact of digital technology (c) a growing concern for democratic pluralism and social justice. We then explain the critical ethnographic approach to LPP research before going on to show how the Critical Connections project relates to this in terms of purposes, principles, and means. A concluding section reflects on implications of the Critical Connections model for heritages languages education and for LPP.

New possibilities for heritage language maintenance and learning

Various assumptions upon which Language Policy and Planning (LPP) has been based have been called into question by developments associated with globalisation including significant migration and major advancements in digital communication. Moreover, this has deeply affected the way notions of language, culture, and identity have come to be perceived through dissolving established boundaries and norms and recognising the way in which life is shaped by dynamic flows and mutations, by increasing hybridity, and by the often-conflicting discourses of ‘liquid modernity’ (Baumann, 2000). Replacing binary and essentialised definitions reflected in nationalist ideology is a growing awareness of deeper connections and a transnational consciousness such that ‘intercultural communication is no longer communication across national borders, but participation in fluctuating networks of individual experiences, memories, and fantasies, multiple allegiances and legitimations, that are expressed and shared mostly, though not exclusively, through language’ (Kramsch & Hua, 2020). In the face of increasing diversity and multilingualism in society and the rich interconnected linguistic repertoires and identities that arise from this, the monolingual assumptions underlying both official education policy and much research have become untenable. Hence the growing consensus that what we are experiencing is a ‘multilingual turn’ (Conteh & Meier, 2014; May, 2014) and a shift away from thinking of multilingualism as a problem to seeing it as a resource both for society and for the individual.

Alongside this shift in attitude has come significant change in the communications landscape as a result of rapid technological advances making it possible to transcend national borders, to travel across space and time, and with increasing ease and fluidity to exist in simultaneous worlds. Drawing on substantial research in this area (Brah, 1996; Tsagarousianou, 2004), Wei (2018, p. 597) notes a shift from often negative perceptions of diasporic communities in terms of ‘victimisation, uprooting and displacement’ to a much more positive view emphasising a ‘capacity for constructing new transnational

spaces of experience that are complexly interfacing with the experiential frameworks that both places of settlement and purported places of origin represent'. Rather than clinging to a sense of nostalgia and loss, this creative and forward-looking stance is about hope and possibilities and a new understanding of self and home. Indeed, virtual communities represent 'important sources for aspiration and imagination' and 'important sites for language policy and planning' (ibid., p. 605). The connectivities provided affect individuals, families, and communities enabling them to 'take control of the multilingual, multimodal, and multisemiotic resources available to them in creating communication spaces for the articulation of their experiences and subjectivities' (ibid., p. 605). Within these spaces, there is scope for the assertion of agency and for challenging language policy and planning by the state and public institutions. It opens up new possibilities for heritage language maintenance and learning.

A further perspective, central to postmodern/late modern conditions, with significant implications for LPP, is that of democratic pluralism and social justice. Language learning is no longer viewed as a neutral pursuit, but one that is deeply rooted in culture, identity, and discourses of power in society. This critical perspective challenges hierarchical views of language and exposes bias and discriminatory practices not least in relation to heritage languages (Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Cummins, 2021). Furthermore, it views language learning as a fundamentally intercultural enterprise prioritising 'voice' and the struggle for 'cultural alternatives' (Pennycook, 1997). Byram's influential model of intercultural communicative competence is based on five *savoirs*, one of which is *savoir s'engager* (critical cultural awareness). This refers to one's 'ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and other cultures and countries' (Byram, 1997, p. 63). It takes language learning beyond functionalism, beyond essentialist views and blind acceptance of inequitable relations of power and recognises the transformative potential of critical pedagogy, giving language teachers 'a way of being imaginative voices from the margins and from the edge' (Phipps & Guilherme, 2004, p. 2). This chimes with Cummins' framework for understanding the workings of power in society and in education systems whereby educators' agency may be exercised in ways which promote either collaborative or coercive relationships. A valuable creative and typically multimodal activity identified by Cummins for achieving the former is that of 'identity texts', which legitimises learners' use of heritage languages and cultural resources to generate new knowledge and at the same time to provide positive affirmation of identity (Cummins, 2021).

In the context of globalisation and a pressing need to foster empathy and cross-cultural understanding, the notion of cosmopolitan citizenship has come to represent a crucial element in intercultural language education with particular relevance for heritage languages. This reflects the growing complexity of people's lives and allegiances, 'which addresses citizenship at a range of scales and which is explicitly linked to human rights principles and standards' (Osler & Starkey, 2015, p. 31) and seeks to deCentre the *intercultural* (Holliday & Amadasi, 2020). Recognising imbalances of power which may become blurred through the use of the term cosmopolitan citizenship, Margaret Hawkins, founder and coordinator of the Global StoryBridges project, prefers 'critical cosmopolitanism' as 'a heuristic for transglobal (and other) encounters across difference, to take into account the identity and positioning work that ensues from imaginaries of privilege, power and status, and to endeavour to foster attitudes and stances of equity,

openness and caring’ (Hawkins, 2021, p. 10). Guilherme (2022) builds on earlier ideas of critical pedagogy and critical cultural awareness to develop the concept of ‘intercultural responsibility’ that challenges language and citizenship education to move beyond borders, adopt a decolonial, critical stand, and develop “glocal” solidarity and cooperation (entangled local and global partnerships) ... for the survival, well-being and growth of planetary components’ (ibid., p. 114). Finally, and addressing issues of social justice head on, there has also been a growing interest recently in decolonising the languages curriculum recognising that ‘multilingualism and its attendant language pedagogies are largely experienced as a colonial practice for many of the world’s populations’ (Phipps, 2019, p. 1). The shifts outlined here, associated with late modern conditions, have also been reflected in recent trends in research on LPP and in the evolution of the onion metaphor and we move on to consider this in the next section.

Including heritage languages within language policy and planning

Within a critical/postmodern perspective on LPP, there is emphasis on ideology, ecology, and agency (Hornberger, 2006). Whilst recognising dominant discourses of power and the way in which official frameworks, including testing regimes, constrain possibilities, it is also true that there are many other forces at play within what is understood as a multilayered and dynamic ecosystem. Seeking to represent this complexity, the continua model of biliteracy is based on an intersecting and nested structure intended to reveal both ‘the multiple and complex interrelationships between bilingualism and literacy’ and ‘the importance of the contexts, media, and content through which biliteracy develops’ (Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester, 2003, p. 96).

The onion metaphor has been found to offer a useful lens for conceptualising layers within the policy process – national, institutional, intergroup, and interpersonal – and the way these intersect and conjoin. As ideas on LPP have developed so the onion metaphor has evolved on culinary lines from an emphasis on ‘unpeeling’ to one of ‘slicing’ and then of ‘stirring’. Whilst peeling the onion is seen to represent ‘a schema of agents, levels and processes ... that together make up the LPP whole’ (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996, p. 408), slicing the onion extends this to ‘reveal agentive spaces in which local actors implement, interpret and perhaps resist policy initiatives in varying and unique ways’ (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007, p. 509). This emphasis on bottom-up agency and complexity is further accentuated in the stirring stage foregrounding the role played by education practitioners as stakeholders and ‘stirrers of the onion, producing the dynamism that moves the performances of all of the actors’ (Menken & García, 2010, p. 259). From this perspective, ‘Language education policies are the joint product of the educators’ constructive activity, as well as the context in which this constructive activity is built’ (ibid., p. 256). Educators can assert their agency in deciding when to stir the onion in the light of factors on the ground, official policy frameworks and their own personal experiences and beliefs shaped by the broader social context. Instead of passive acceptance of an ideology which serves to shut out heritage languages, a subversive counter-cultural position can find space to breathe and grow.

This approach to policymaking implies closer collaboration between researchers and practitioners as envisaged in the Educational Language Policy Engagement and Action Research (ELPEAR) initiative (Johnson, 2013). This is mirrored in our methodological

approach in the Critical Connections project (discussed below) which is collaborative and process-oriented towards change integrating Action Research into the critical ethnographic research praxis. The cyclical and reflexive nature of Action Research provides space for dialogue, collaboration, and trying things out. Research can create new knowledge, but it also needs ‘to become usable knowledge and consequently an agent for change’ (Anderson & Macleroy, 2016, p. 136). Our research approach embraces different ways of knowing and challenges the limitations of dominant cognitive, logocentric research methodologies and the artificial divide between knowing and doing, between research and practice, between the academic and the personal, between the visceral and the rational. Collaborative creative research ‘opens up working with others to achieve the infusion of creative arts practice into our teaching and learning in schools’ (Andrews & Almohammad, 2022, p. 3). Creative processes and products are a core feature of our research design with multilingual digital storytelling at its centre and are increasingly recognised as important elements in heritage language pedagogy (Anderson, 2023).

A critical ethnographic approach to LPP scrutinises the complex dynamic processes involved in LPP and places a focus on the ethics and politics of research which leads to change (McCarty, 2015). Cummins (2021) returns to these research partnerships and ways of knowledge building in rethinking the education of multilingual/heritage language learners and ‘opening up a two-way dialogue between educators and researchers where researchers listen more and respect the role of educators as knowledge generators’ (ibid., p. 256). However, Pahl (2022) believes that ‘imagining otherwise’ is a key part of multilingual scholarship and she recognises that young people need to be part of these research partnerships and as agents of change: ‘children as active researchers and investigators of their world are a key part of this enlarged way of seeing research and practice as intertwined’ (ibid., p. 319). Approaching LPP research in this way involves thinking about the politics of researching multilingually, how knowledges are constructed and in what languages, and the need to decolonise methods and languages (Phipps, 2022). A multilingual critical ethnographic approach to LPP research has to be about adopting ‘methodologies that are sensitive to and empathic towards local languages, epistemologies and methodologies’ (Holmes et al., 2022a, p. 14) and decolonising researcher methodologies ‘to open up knowledge construction that recognises the multiple languages, forms of engagement and modalities employed in local contexts’ (Holmes et al., 2022b, p. 345).

The turn in critical ethnography towards ‘greater reflexivity in the design and conduct of research projects’ (Martin-Jones & da Costa Cabral, 2018, p. 85) has led to more dialogic approaches to fieldwork. In the Critical Connections project, we use a range of data collection methods (Anderson & Macleroy, 2016, p. 142) including video recordings and photographs of the making of digital stories taken by researchers, teachers, and student co-researchers and shared during regular team meetings. This complex, dynamic, and dialogic approach towards the design of our research project is a key feature in its sustainability building on trust, shared knowledge, and skills developed over time. In reflecting on directions for future research in LPP, Pérez-Milans and Tollefson (2018) recognise the continuing importance of critical approaches and ethnographic research and the recurring issue about ‘what counts as relevant knowledge and, accordingly, about what are the most appropriate ways of collecting and analyzing data’ (ibid., 731).

Grassroots policymaking in practice: agency, activism, and alternative voices

It is June 2022 and the tenth year of the Critical Connections project (2012-ongoing)². The annual festival is taking place (online for the past 2 years) to celebrate and share multilingual digital stories made by young people learning foreign and heritage languages as well as English as an Additional Language and English mother tongue in nine countries: England, Australia, Cyprus, Germany, India, Italy, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Turkey. The students are from primary and secondary age ranges, attending mainstream, independent, and complementary¹ schools. Coordinated by researchers at Goldsmiths, University of London, there has also been support from colleagues at universities in Luxembourg, Australia, Taiwan, and Germany. Students have approached the broad, cross-curricular project theme of 'Our Planet' in different ways, drawing on personal experience and beliefs as well as individual strengths. In some schools valuable cross-curricular collaborations have been developed in particular with teachers involved in media and the arts. The opportunity to draw on and extend digital media skills in the context of story construction and creative realisation has been found engaging and at times challenging. There has been an important emphasis on multilingual/heritage language representation within and across films and on presentation to a diverse, international audience. In line with the principles of Project Based Language Learning (PBL), language has been viewed as a medium for interdisciplinary learning and for carrying out meaningful tasks centred on real-life issues.

Importantly students have drawn on funds of knowledge in the home and community and this has been particularly affirming for heritage language students. Since digital stories are made in bilingual/multilingual version through use of voiceover – subtitles, the creative process has necessarily involved translanguaging skills, including translation, developing important understandings about language and culture. Students have been encouraged to work collaboratively and to take responsibility both for initial ideas and creative development of their stories. To stimulate multimodal and intertextual thinking, they have been asked to consider how poetry and visual art can be integrated into their digital stories or alongside them. The emphasis has been on a sense of ownership, voice, and activist citizenship. Creating and sharing multilingual digital stories has brought a sense of purpose to language learning often missing in the traditional language classroom. It has connected with learners' heritage languages and lived experiences and has fostered emotional, sensory, transcultural and aesthetic dimensions. In providing a safe space for multilingual learning, it has been empowering, especially for heritage language learners, bringing deeper learning and a renewed sense of self. As a culmination to project work over the academic year, the festival has generated for both students and teachers an enormous feeling of achievement and pride.

How though did such a project come about and how does it sit in relation to official frameworks in language education? In the next sections of this article, we look at the Critical Connections project through the lens of grassroots policy making in practice and argue that it represents a means by which educators in schools and universities in collaboration with students and parents/carers can collectively exercise bottom-up agency to address key issues in language and literacy education and to disrupt dominant discourses which we see as oppressive, inequitable and out of step with the needs of the

modern world. Whilst focussing in particular on the situation of heritage language learners, the distinctive feature of the model we propose is that it is integrated and inclusive. In other words, it is pluralist in orientation and draws on what connects languages and cultures rather than on what separates them. It consciously crosses borders and stimulates critical and creative thinking. It understands how linguistic repertoires operate as single systems and how translanguaging can offer a positive strategy both for communication and for learning. It views multilingualism, inclusive of heritage languages, as a potential resource and a right rather than as a problem and it recognises that intercultural skills, including the ability to decentre and see the world from different perspectives to our own, are intrinsic to twenty-first century literacy and to global citizenship. Cummins (2021) in his sampling of crosslinguistic/translanguaging projects cites our Multilingual Digital Storytelling (MDST) project as the one example of inspirational pedagogy from the UK and recognises how the project promotes heritage languages and how ‘digital storytelling enabled students to push identity boundaries and to reposition themselves in relation to their own languages and cultures’ (p. 364).

Purposes, principles, means: including heritage languages in the critical connections project

Purposes

When the Critical Connections project was conceived over a decade ago, it was becoming increasingly obvious that official language curriculum policy in the UK was stuck in backward-looking, inequitable, nationalistic notions of language and culture which failed to reflect the changing life experiences, opportunities, and challenges facing young people in a globalising world. As language educators in close contact with schools, we were struck in particular by (a) growing disaffection with language learning (b) lack of understanding of what an interculturally oriented curriculum might look like (c) ongoing marginalisation of heritage languages (d) inadequate and largely uncritical responses to use of digital media including transsemiotic, online communication (Anderson & Obied/Macleroy, 2011, p. 2011).

Rather than tinkering at the edges, we felt that a complete rethink was required based on a unified and principled approach to language and literacy education focussed on making connections rather than entrenching divisions, placing the learner at the centre of the educational enterprise, and fostering intercultural being. We understood deep connections between multilingualism, multimodal literacy, and cosmopolitan citizenship. We recognised the importance of the innovative ‘school as basecamp’ model breaking down barriers between learning in school, home, and community contexts and arguing for learning activities to be ‘placed (located ... in a world that the student recognises and is seeking to understand), purposeful (authentic ... fosters a sense of agency), passion-led (enlists the outside passions of both students and teachers ...) and pervasive (enables ... learning outside the classroom)’ (PHF and Innovation Unit, 2012, p. 8). The design of the Critical Connections pedagogical model fitted with this pattern of extended relationships and the perspective of a local and global community of practice (Figure 1). In talking about how digital literacy spaces work, Bloch (2021) combines the concept of ‘community of practice’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to discuss

influences on design with ‘affinity spaces’ (Gee, 2004) to talk about connections, roles, and relationships across these spaces. Teachers and students often cross from one space to another and ‘such crossings can support student literacy development, provide alternative perspectives or reflect multiple literacies’ (Bloch, 2021, p. 221).

We were becoming aware of initiatives involving digital storytelling and the relevance they could have in the educational context. We were sympathetic to the emphasis on storytelling as a way of promoting meaning-oriented language development and intercultural understanding as well as encouraging learner agency and thematic Project Based Language learning (PBL) (Beckett & Slater, 2019). We considered this a means of addressing the particular needs of the heritage language learner for whom foreign language textbook-based approaches are often inappropriate and may even be felt to be insulting. We saw how a multilingual dimension could be enabled digitally and we realised that, by establishing Goldsmiths, University of London, as a hub and building a network of project schools around it, students could have a genuine international audience for their work instilling a sense of themselves as activist global citizens. We realised that the project would need to fit within local heritage language and education ecosystems both across and within different countries and that flexibility to accommodate this was important. We further appreciated that the creative digital dimension would be motivating though challenging for students, teachers, and researchers and designed the project to evolve through dialogue and collaboration at all stages.

Our creative and holistic vision, linking language learning with other curriculum areas and recognising multiple ways of knowing, put learners and their lived experience, their senses and emotions, their intercultural and aesthetic being, at the heart of the language learning process. As developments over the past decade have shown, the project has connected powerfully with teachers and students, has built confidence, and has given us a renewed sense of purpose in the language-and-culture learning enterprise, inclusive of heritage languages.

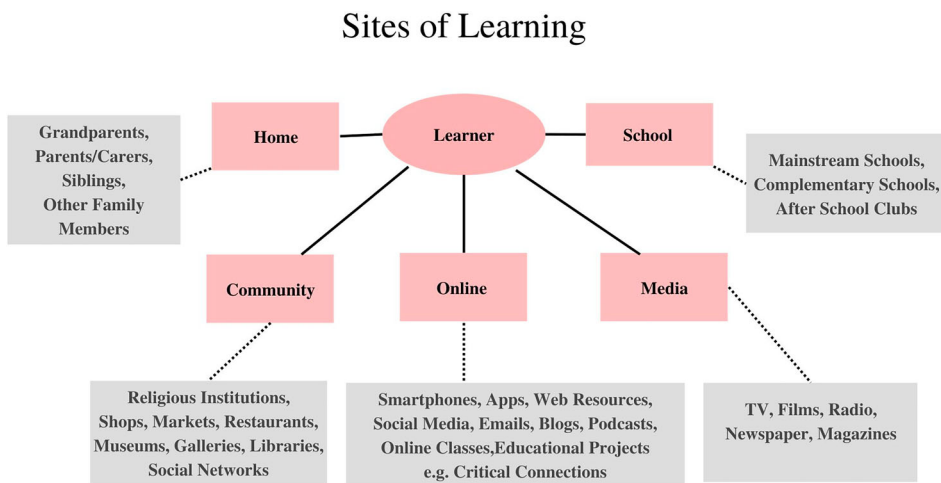


Figure 1. Sites of learning within a community of practice.

Design principles

The Critical Connections: Multilingual Digital Storytelling project has been grounded in a number of shared principles which have shaped its direction and supported a collaborative ethos (Figure 2).

1. Communication - translingual, transcultural, transemiotic.

Countering ‘two solitudes’ or ‘language separation assumptions’ (Cummins, 2021, p. 322) in regard to language learning and viewing language as part of a much wider, fluid and entangled semiotic system, the project has supported the creation of stories by young people in various combinations of languages sometimes involving standard and non-standard forms. An impressive example comes from Herz-Jesu Institut, Mühlbach, a secondary school and Italy’s first climate school. Work on their well-crafted film, *Solutions*, illustrates very clearly the complex, intertextual creative process by which multilingual and multimodal elements were assembled and fused into a strongly felt message, reflecting local cultures and local heritage languages, as well as personal experience, feelings, and an aesthetic sensibility. Thought has gone into the particular affordances of film with careful storyboarding and consideration given to camera shots, angles, and perspective techniques. There is fluid movement across students’ heritage languages and first

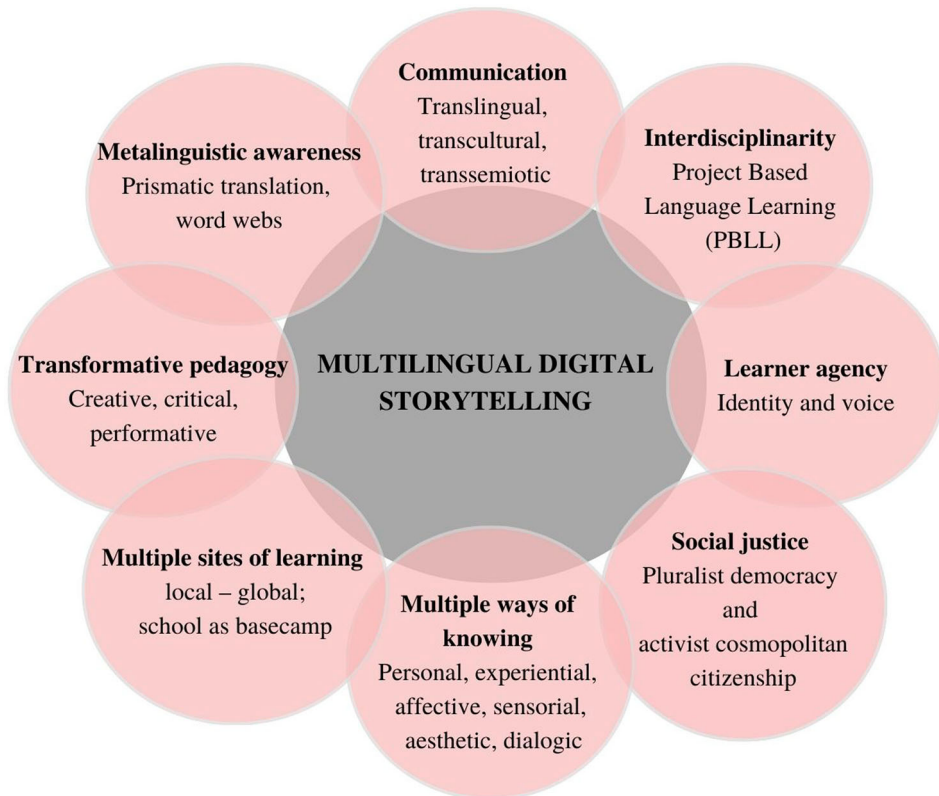


Figure 2. Critical Connections: Design Principles.

languages (German, German dialect, Italian, Latin, Spanish, and English) validating language constellations (Lo Bianco, 2021) at individual and societal levels and affirming syncretic identities. Alongside the digital story, a wider range of students at the school contributed to a multilingual poetry and artwork book which served to trigger powerful emotional, multisensory, spiritual, and ethical responses to the Our Planet theme. Each poem was presented bilingually or trilingually opposite a visual artwork, the two modes complementing each other. An audio feature linking to recordings by students of their own poems further enhanced enjoyment of the poems.

Solutions: <https://vimeo.com/742188147>.

Multilingual poetry book: <https://goldsmithsmdst.com/herz-jesu-institut-muhlbachnorth-italy/>

2. Interdisciplinarity – project-based language learning

Multilingual Digital Storytelling typically involves crossing curriculum borders in the service of story and real-life issues. Arising from a central theme or project, this is an integrated, holistic approach in which creativity and collaboration play an important role. Importantly, students are encouraged to make connections to their own lived experience and to carry out a sequence of activities incorporating a multilingual focus, inclusive of heritage languages, and using a range of digital tools to create and then share digital stories. Enhancing filmmaking with a focus on other art forms including poetry, drama, visual art, music, and dance has been particularly useful (Anderson, 2023) and an example of this has been referred to above. Sometimes there can be opportunities for collaborations between specialists in different areas and this has been found to be highly beneficial for students and teachers alike. An interesting, interdisciplinary project based on the Our Planet theme with the title, *Green Planet Dreamers*, was carried out by secondary students attending the Go Ecolo Club at the Europa Secondary School, UK. Led by the Human Sciences teacher, interacting with the class mostly in French, a story idea was developed based on students dozing off in a science lesson and daydreaming about environmental problems and solutions. Different groups of students presented their vision of the earth combining their different languages (French, German, Spanish, and English) and drawing on various resources and techniques (slow motion, images, play doh, and real film). Bringing this imaginative and aesthetic dimension allowed empathetic, emotional, and multisensory responses to be conveyed adding impact to the dry scientific facts. As well as informing viewers on a range of environmental issues, the film also highlighted ways of taking action as global citizens.

Green Planet Dreamers: <https://vimeo.com/594703502>.

3. Learner agency – identity and voice

Moving beyond the narrow instrumental focus of the communicative era, language learning has come to be viewed much more in terms of personal agency, translingual-transcultural meaning making, and investment of identity. For heritage language learners, this carries particular significance as it challenges discriminatory discourses and affirms multilingual and pluralist perspectives on education. It also recognises how lived experience and funds of knowledge in the home represent important resources

for learning and a potential sense of pride for young people. Not least it can empower students to step across social and cultural divides and to make their voices heard. The principle of learner agency is at the heart of the Critical Connections project and, although challenging at times, has been a major energising force in initiating projects and in carrying them forward. A good illustration can be seen in the development of work at Shirasu Bunko, Japanese Saturday Reading Group in Cambridge, UK, which aims to support family literacy and appreciation of Japanese culture. The teacher spoke with the class to see if they were interested in creating a Japanese-English digital story and made clear this would be very much their own work and responsibility. It was decided that the film should focus on the situation of bears in Japan, firstly through recounting a traditional tale and secondly through providing background on the current problem, analysing the issues and highlighting the benefits of living in harmony with nature. In making their film, *The Extinction Crisis of Kintaro's Friend – The Future of Bears in Japan*, students invested considerable effort in presenting their work in a way that is engaging and fun, involves multiple semiotic resources (animated origami puppets, drawings, calligraphy, photographs, and sound effects), that strongly reflects Japanese culture and values (dress, moral values, showing respect – bowing, concept of honour, and samurai tradition) and also conveys a serious message about human relationship to nature. Children's voices come through loud and clear. In the introduction to their film, children pose the question 'Bear's future? ... Is it anything to do with OUR future?'. The topic is thoroughly researched, highlighting ecological but also economic dimensions. According to the class teacher, participation in the project and representing themselves as bilingual Japanese-English global citizens was a source of great pride and a motivation for students to pursue their Japanese studies.

The Extinction Crisis of Kintaro's Friend – The Future of Bears in Japan: <https://vimeo.com/742180473>.

4. Social justice – pluralist democracy and activist cosmopolitan citizenship

Arising from intercultural and critical directions in language pedagogy in the context of globalisation, issues of social justice and decolonisation have come to assume growing importance. Activist cosmopolitan citizenship means not only gaining a better understanding of the way things are, but also asserting a right to challenge the status quo and call for change. By establishing a global online network of young storytellers the Critical Connections project democratises communication and provides a supportive context for participation and dialogue. To illustrate this principle, we turn to work carried out at the Secondary College of Languages, Australia, and a multilingual/heritage languages (Arabic, Turkish, and English) class of teenage students. Drawing on the powerful symbolism of a teardrop to represent life on earth, the film, *Our Dying Planet*, shows students going through a process of awareness raising, de'elop'ng knowledge and understanding, forming their own opinions, and finally taking action through peaceful protest. Scenes reflect everyday situations and the importance of adjusting lifestyles at home and in the community. As class teachers observed, working on the digital story impacted strongly student attitudes, leading them to take responsibility. It also led teachers to think of ways in which work on the issue could be built into the curriculum. Hearing similar messages coming from young people of different backgrounds around

the world instilled a sense of solidarity and pride. In the process, it showed how heritage language learning can be about personal development and finding a voice.

Our Dying Planet: <https://vimeo.com/742008053>.

5. Multiple ways of knowing – personal, experiential, affective, sensorial, aesthetic, and dialogic

The Critical Connections Project views language and culture learning holistically as a personal, embodied, and creative process of meaning-making. We recognise how human lives are often intertwined with material reality, how objects can tell stories and speak of who we are and what we value. The emphasis on the arts generally (visual art, poetry, song, and dance) alongside film-making opens up different ways of experiencing reality beyond rational, logocentric thinking. It recognises how language and culture is infused with emotional and sensory impressions and that this, in large part, is what constitutes their power to move us. Beyond mundane instrumental transactions, Critical Connections encourages attention to the aesthetic dimension of (heritage) language learning and to impulses of the imagination. This comes across to great effect in the touching and magical bilingual French-English film created by a Year 5 class at the Europa Primary School, made up of students from French, English, and other backgrounds. The film is named, *From my Window – De ma Fenêtre*, a metaphor which evokes personal ways of seeing and experiencing the world. The film incorporates vibrant nature painting, still and moving images, and striking digital animation and this combines with the performing of a simple but moving song ‘Je suis comme toi’ adapted from a piece sung by two girls originally from Madagascar. The elements are assembled with thought and originality and the message is heartfelt. Although originally focussed on the environment the children’s work evolved to also reflect their collective response to the Ukrainian crisis. Whilst recognising the suffering and destruction caused the voices and expressions of these young children retain a feeling of hope, a spirit of solidarity and a sense of wonder at the natural world.

From my Window – De ma Fenêtre: <https://vimeo.com/719861849>.

6. Multiple sites of learning – local – global; school as basecamp

Language and culture learning should not be confined to the classroom. They are part of a much wider set of relationships and experiences, part of a journey of life connecting us both to the human and non-human world. When we understand school as ‘basecamp’, we extend our horizons and come to see connections and possibilities. When schools start to see children’s heritage languages as a resource and as cultural capital rather than as a problem, they not only validate important skills and experiences, but affirm hybrid identities. Sadly, children’s heritage languages are often devalued by mainstream schools and there is still little recognition of their multilingual lives beyond school. However, during the pandemic, these boundaries between sites of learning became blurred and teachers had to find new ways to connect with students through online learning. In the Critical Connections project, an Egyptian doctoral researcher in London set up a series of online workshops with students in Turkey to scaffold their poetry and digital storytelling. These Arabic background students studying at Safir International

School, Istanbul, Turkey, explored their migrant identities and mobile sense of place through ecopoetry and creating their film, *Breeze* – ت. Acting as co-researchers, the young people went on sensory nature walks documenting the process through poetry and photographs. In a deeply moving combination of poetry, images, and sound they explore their ecological identities through asking how it feels to fly as a bird, to flow as a river, to stand tall as a tree. Through poetic expressivity, we realise the connection of language and culture to sensory and emotional experience and to the natural world. Finally, the breeze brings solace and hope reviving the spirit of life.

Breeze – ت: <https://vimeo.com/594718826>.

7. Transformative pedagogy – creative, critical, and performative

Transformative pedagogy is about young people's agency and identity investment, but it is also about gaining the confidence to address sensitive and challenging issues. It is an approach to learning that requires collaboration with carefully scaffolded spaces for young people to discuss and discard ideas, engage with a range of perspectives, and frame their stories in creative and sometimes deeply critical ways. The multilingual/heritage language (Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, English) film, *Menstrual Cycle* made by secondary students at K'sirs International School, India is a striking example of this. Probing the experiences and opinions of both females and males across generations and assembling a range of relevant evidence, the film highlights the discriminatory and cruel attitudes and behaviours still affecting girls and women in India and elsewhere. The seriousness with which students regard the issue is clearly evident in their work, which is powerful, well-crafted, engaging, and focussed. By making their voices heard through emancipatory activist film-making, these students are demonstrating the importance of democratic participation and of standing up against injustice. It is encouraging they received the support of their school in doing this.

Menstrual Cycle: <https://vimeo.com/742172357>.

8. Metalinguistic awareness – prismatic translation and word webs

All of the digital stories are created in bilingual/multilingual version, inclusive of heritage languages, and have depended on students' translation skills. Sometimes this has involved moving across different scripts and different writing systems. Translation has heightened students' awareness of how meaning is conveyed differently in different languages and of tensions between literal word-for-word translation and freer approaches. There has been encouragement for students to explore possibilities and experiment with different versions (prismatic approach). At the same time close attention has needed to be given to words and, especially in poetic writing, to cultural connotations and sensory qualities embedded in words which can add colour and emotion to expression. Sometimes teachers have used linguistic discussion to highlight relationships between words in different languages and to create word webs to make the connections transparent. Through storyboarding students have been made aware of how language combines with other modalities (visual, audio, and gestural) in film-making drawing on multiple semiotic resources. In the film, *Save the Planet*, a group of mainly heritage language learners at the Peace School, an Arabic complementary school in London,

move flexibly between Arabic and English in both oral and written communication to document their local environmental project. Moving between unconscious, naturalistic communication, and conscious reflection, we see them working collaboratively on drafting and redrafting and translating text, paying attention to register and vocabulary development.

Save the Planet – <https://vimeo.com/742183760>.

Means

We now turn to look at how the Critical Connections project has been implemented in terms of management and organisation; relationships and communication; approaches to planning; ongoing professional development; research and dissemination; and specific ways it provides a model of interculturally oriented critical cosmopolitan education. We demonstrate how a bottom-up collaborative approach towards LPP is vital for sustaining and promoting heritage languages.

Our approach to language learning combines Project-Based Language Learning (PBLL), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) in an effort to radically transform the way children and young people learn (heritage) languages, develop multilingual literacy and build better connections with local and global communities. From the outset, the Critical Connections project has been distinctive in the way it brings together teachers from different areas of language learning and from different sectors (mainstream, independent, and complementary). It has harnessed the power of technology to build a network (a) to reinforce an international, intercultural context for the project; (b) so that students can have a genuine international audience for their work; and (c) so that teachers and researchers can learn from each other and collaborate in professional development and research initiatives. Thomas and Yamazaki (2021) argue that in the context of project-based learning and digital technologies several approaches have emerged that bring together content and communicative skills but with ‘CLIL being perhaps the most important’ (ibid., p. 9). CLIL in its various forms is now widely recognised as a fitting approach to heritage language learning (McPake, 2023). Research continues to demonstrate the value of project-based language learning that moves beyond principally linguistic outcomes and develops skills in digital technology and intercultural communication. Our project demonstrates the great potential for reconceptualising heritage language learning within a CLIL framework to make critical and creative use of new technologies and address ‘problems related to inclusivity, social justice, and environmentalism’ (ibid., p. 9).

The Critical Connections project is innovative in the way it has integrated digital technology critically and creatively into its model of language learning. In recent research, we set out the different stages of the digital storytelling process aligned with the pedagogical aims and the potential of CALL application (Anderson & Macleroy, 2021, p. 240). This approach to language learning using CLIL does place a ‘heavier cognitive load on teachers and students and training is essential to bolster the specific knowledge and skills required by the approach’ (Thomas & Yamazaki, 2021, p. 9). Our experience as language teachers and teacher educators, as well as researchers, helped us to involve teachers, including heritage language teachers, and trainee teachers in the project from its

conception. We were also keen to involve young people in these research partnerships and the student participant researchers (SPR) model Illuminate was adapted for the project and later reflected upon by Carlile (2016). Students from different project schools attended training at Goldsmiths and developed skills in interviewing, observing, and documenting the process.

Through this project, not only did we extend our knowledge, but we developed our skills to learn alongside others and co-operate with them to find out something specific. Collaborating with schools has enhanced our social skills as well as existing knowledge (Student co-researchers).

Collaborative project planning has been a key strategy in implementing the project in very different settings and with teachers from different backgrounds and with very different areas of expertise: ‘the space for dialogue and discussion was crucial to developing expertise and confidence in what for most represented a new approach to language teaching’ (Anderson & Macleroy, 2021, p. 241). In our approach, we place dialogue at the centre.

The answer to the question of how we should teach, is also dialogue. It is the ‘inside out: outside-in’ nature of the dialogic relation that makes teaching and learning possible. In order to teach at all, this relationship needs first to be established and then all teaching needs to be responsive to and build on the voices of learners.

(Wegerif, 2013, p. 35)

We strongly believe in a staged collaborative approach to the implementation of the Critical Connections project. We designed, in collaboration with project teachers, a Handbook for Teachers (Anderson et al., 2014) to act as a resource and support for integrating the project in different sites of learning. We set out this staged approach in more detail below to produce the final multilingual digital story (Figure 3).

Pre-production

We now have a well-established model of implementation with some heritage language teachers part of the project since 2012. Establishing strong links with community-based complementary schools has been a vital part of integrating heritage language teachers into the project. Growing familiarity with using online digital spaces for team meetings and training has meant the project has expanded into seven new countries (Australia, Egypt, Germany, India, Italy, Malaysia, and Turkey) since 2020.

The Critical Connections project is implemented cyclically with a film festival at the end of each year to exhibit and share the multilingual digital stories. We start the project each year with a Critical Connections team meeting involving the lead project teachers in reflection, dialogue and language planning. Placing storytelling at the centre of our Critical Connections model acknowledges that stories are at the root of culture and help us to understand alternative ways of seeing and being in the world. (Lambert, 2013). Fictional stories and life stories create a good context for heritage language learners to extend existing linguistic and intercultural competence and develop creative and critical thinking and bi-/multi-lingual literacy (Breuer et al., 2021). As part of the language planning for each year, we decide on a

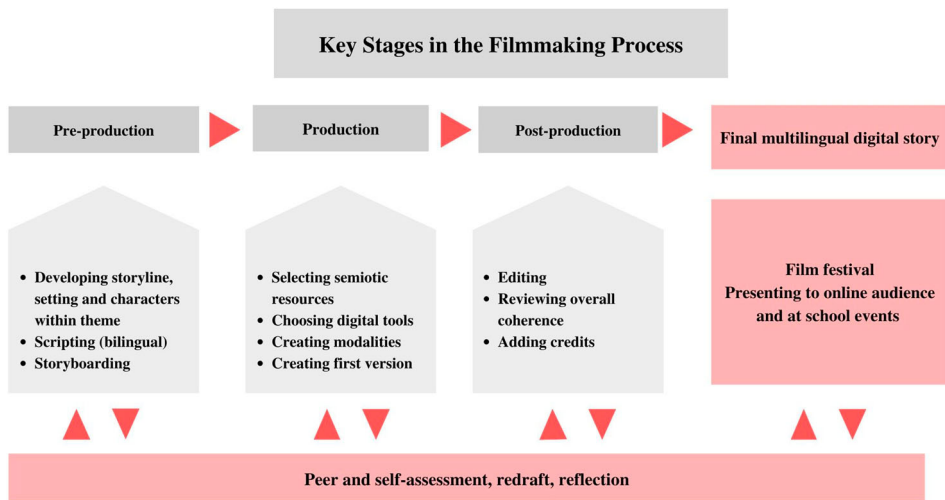


Figure 3. Key stages in the filmmaking process.

common theme which helps to connect young storytellers across different local and global communities. In the past few years, we have turned to environmental activism and focused on the theme of ‘Our Planet’. Teachers also consider the following questions:

1. What pedagogical approach is required to encourage learner engagement, criticality, and autonomy?
2. What are the various linguistic, intercultural, and cognitive challenges in creating multilingual digital stories?
3. How can multilingual digital storytelling become embedded within a Languages Scheme of Work or across the curriculum?
4. What role can Senior Management play in the development of digital literacy?

(Anderson et al., 2014, p. 78)

It is important for teachers to make students aware of the multilingual dimension to the filmmaking process which is about exploring ‘critical connections between languages and how their languages and cultures can be represented in their digital stories’ (Anderson et al., 2014, p. 22). After the first year of the project, we created a 10-stage framework for embedding multilingual digital storytelling within a thematic unit of work which was trialled and then included in the Handbook for Teachers (*ibid.*, pp. 34–35). The pre-production stage includes working around examples of digital stories as well as planning, researching, drafting a script, and storyboarding. Learner-centred assessment is a key feature of this process-oriented approach and developing learners’ evaluation skills to conduct peer and self-assessment as an ongoing, cyclical process of reviewing, redrafting, and reflecting. Additionally, students are encouraged to explore ideas for stories and characters through improvisation, role play, nature walks, music, dance, cultural artefacts, and artwork and develop new digital skills. Storyboarding enables students to bring ideas together and helps to scaffold the emerging bi-/multi-lingual script for

each frame (particularly in creating animation) and/or scene. Integrating some explicit language-focused activities to explore relevant language functions (e.g. describing, comparing, expressing opinions), structures, and vocabulary fields and to develop the range of skills involved in translation is also important. Guidance on linguistic analysis, with examples in the following heritage languages: Arabic, Chinese, and Greek is provided in the Handbook (*ibid.*, p.65–75).

Production

This is the stage where young people start to see themselves as filmmakers and develop a sense of what makes a good digital story and how to communicate their message to a global community. Collaborating and working in partnership with the British Film Institute (BFI) and film educator, Joanna Van de Meer, to run media workshops for teachers and students has helped us to understand how to support the production process. Story remains central to the production stage and young people learn how to use digital tools such as cameras, iPads, and mobile phones to shape and frame their digital stories. New project teachers can access a series of professional development resources on the project website including how to use a variety of different camera shots and angles for different effects.

One thing I noticed between the first and second stories was that by the time they were making the second story they were thinking about shot angles and they were thinking about how to build their own images rather than just finding something on the internet. So it was much more creative and they were thinking about film-making skills rather than just language skills (Project Teacher).

The Critical Connections project is radical in the ways we reconceptualise (heritage) language learning and give young people the tools to seek out new ways of finding and experiencing language in the spaces around them. The focus on environmental activism since 2020 has focused film production on finding diverse ways to support language learning and sustaining our environment. This project has enabled young people to learn how to use their multilingual filmmaking as a powerful tool to document change and seek solutions.

Post-production

In the Critical Connections project, we advocate using free editing software and young people create their digital stories with still and/or moving images. The editing process is hard, challenging, and time consuming but as the project has progressed over the last 10 years both teachers and students have become more adept at editing their shots and film footage into a 3–5-minute digital story. More experienced project teachers share resources and document the filmmaking process to support teachers new to the project and parents/community members who are filmmakers themselves have enabled young people to develop further digital media skills.

A particular challenge in the post-production stage of multilingual digital storytelling is adding subtitles to the stories. Young people have to think carefully about how the subtitles appear on the screen and allow time for captions to be read and processed by an

international audience (with English as an additional language). They may be working across a range of languages, including heritage languages, and have to collaborate closely with peers to translate and make meaning.

I can't imagine any other project stimulating so many aspects of the young learner. Digital skills, collaboration, problem solving, nuanced language translation as well as the joy expressing yourself through art. These students are skilled and ready for employment in the twenty-first century (Project Teacher).

A vital part of the pre-production, production, and post-production stages is learning to work towards deadlines and being able to create a final multilingual film that young people are proud to present and share across a wider digital storytelling community. Our research clearly shows that when students are engaged in authentic content and tasks they are 'motivated to learn new language and media skills to produce their digital story' (Anderson & Macleroy, 2021, p. 254).

The Critical Connections project has major implications for teacher professional development as (heritage language) teachers need to be supported to develop digital technology skills and be given the confidence and motivation to shift their pedagogical approach. This investment in teacher professional development is the key to sustainability and expansion of the project across languages and countries. Project teachers have become experts in the field developing invaluable skills including research, leading workshops, and presenting at international conferences and language events. Findings from our project provide major implications for language planning and policy.

Findings: including heritage languages within the digital storytelling process

In this article, we have shown how the Critical Connections model removes heritage languages from the margins and positions them at the heart of an inclusive, interdisciplinary, multilingual approach to language learning which is translingual, transcultural, and transsemiotic. Our model connects with significant trends in heritage language education and language education more broadly including CLIL, PBL, digital communication, out of school learning, personal development, arts-based approaches, and critical cosmopolitan citizenship.

We have argued that in an era of rapid globalisation and growing instability, it is becoming even more pressing to engage in sustainable research that fosters intercultural responsibility. The Critical Connections model of policy-making in practice fits with developments in LPP research towards recognising bottom-up agency, local contexts, and decolonising research methodologies (Holmes et al., 2022b). It is a global multilingual literacy project which is recognised by and supports important bodies involved with heritage languages including the Sydney Institute for Community Languages Education (SICLE); Coalition of Community-Based Heritage Language Schools (US); Cambridge Research in Community Language Education Network (CRiCLE); National Resource Centre for Supplementary Education (NRCSE); Association for Language Learning (ALL) and the National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum (NALDIC).

Conclusion: implications for heritage language learning and maintenance and for LPP

To conclude, we look at how the Critical Connections Project challenges inequalities in multilingualism and multilingual literacy (Donahue, 2021) and provides a model that enables heritage language learners (and all students) to make connections across all their languages and for heritage languages to become more visible across different sites of learning. We make the following recommendations for heritage language planning and policy:

- Heritage language teachers (working in community-based complementary schools) are provided with opportunities to collaborate with mainstream teachers to develop language planning strategies across sites of learning.
- Heritage languages are integrated across different sites of learning and digital spaces.
- Heritage language teachers are supported to develop skills in using digital technology creatively and critically.
- Activist citizenship becomes integral in planning PBLL approaches with heritage languages.

Notes

1. Complementary schools
This is a term used in the UK to refer to voluntary, community-based schools which operate mainly at weekends.
2. Films created for the Critical Connections project, including all those referred to in this article may be found at: <https://goldsmithsmdst.com/>

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<https://goldsmithsmdst.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/our-planet-festival-booklet.pdf>
https://goldsmithsmdst.files.wordpress.com/2022/06/ourplanetfestivalbooklet_2022.pdf

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