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Bringing One Language to Another: Multilingualism as a Resource in the Language Classroom

Multilingualism, which is defined as speaking two or more languages, is a growing worldwide phenomenon. Due to increased mobility and closely linked economies, many countries currently have significant multilingual populations in their workforces and educational systems. The demands of international commerce alone have engendered a large amount of interest and attention to multilingual education and training programs. In this time of unprecedented contact among different language groups and cultures, speaking two or more languages can make a difference in where one lives and may determine educational and career choices. English, as a major language of international business, is spoken as a second or third language in many countries around the world. In fact, English "can be seen as a factor in the creation of multilingualism today" (Jessner 2006, 2), and educational programs in English are in high demand.

Students who study English as a Foreign Language (EFL) often already speak two or more languages. Knowing more than one language is a necessity for many people worldwide, whether it is because their parents come from different language backgrounds, because their home, regional, national, or school languages are different, or for a variety of other reasons.

Knowledge of more than one language is a valuable asset when one wants to learn subsequent languages; unfortunately, multilingual students often take the value of their own language knowledge for granted and do not take full advantage of what they already know how to do. Nevertheless, EFL teachers can tap into their students' familiarity with multiple languages to advance learning and accomplish what one EFL student referred to as "bringing one language to another." Engaging in and reflecting on activities that draw on multilingual experience is beneficial to students, their teachers, and to anyone

who wants to add a new dimension to language teaching and learning.

This article will show how a lesson for university undergraduate EFL students in Indonesia was adapted for students of different ages, levels, and language contexts. The goal is to connect the acquisition of English with the students' previous language knowledge and make this multilingual awareness a part of oral discussions, written assignments, and projects in the classroom.

Multilingualism and subsequent language learning

Research evidence suggests that acquiring more than one language creates different kinds of connections in the brain, which gives multilingual individuals an advantage in some respects compared with monolingual individuals. An important article by Lambert (1985) cites a number of studies about the enhanced *cognitive flexibility* that balanced bilinguals experience, which makes them better able to engage in problem solving and adapt to new ideas. Despite the potential benefits of multilingualism, students who are learning additional languages in school do not always recognize the importance of already speaking more than one language. For example, multilinguals already know a great deal about language, often unconsciously, including grammatical knowledge, such as how different languages handle verb conjugation, and sociocultural knowledge, such as understanding that what is considered polite in one language may be rude in another. In addition, those who speak more than one language are also generally more aware of sociolinguistic variables and functions than those who speak one language, and they are adept at switching between different regional varieties, registers, and formal and informal language styles. This knowledge, especially when it is brought to a conscious level, is known as *language awareness* and *metalinguistic awareness*, and is a special advantage of multilingualism (Cook 1995; Jessner 2006; Svalberg 2007). *Metalinguistic awareness*, in particular, refers to knowing about and being able to talk about how language is structured and how it functions.

Ongoing discussions among language researchers and teachers concern the identification and explanation of exactly how language awareness originates and varies among learners. In a review of language awareness as a field of research and practice, Svalberg (2007) emphasizes the need to actively engage language awareness because it is not "a purely intellectual awareness and is not passive" (302). Garcia (2008) makes the point that *multilingual language awareness* is a necessity for teachers of multilingual students; besides knowing about languages, subject matter, and teaching methodology, instructors should have an understanding of the political struggles and social circumstances of students' schools and communities.

Unfortunately, students (and even teachers) may enter the English classroom thinking that the languages students already speak inhibit or otherwise stand in the way of learning English. In addition, when studying EFL, multilingual students will not always make the connection between their previous language learning—which may have been acquired at an early age—and their current language learning. These same students may be discouraged by the fact that they have had less exposure to foreign languages compared to ones with which they are already familiar. Preconceived notions about the comparative value of different languages will also affect student learning and use of these languages. A goal of EFL teachers, therefore, is to counteract these notions and encourage their multilingual students to reflect and draw on their rich store of language information and skills in order to facilitate the learning of English.

Language awareness in a multilingual context

During a semester as a visiting lecturer at an Indonesian university on the island of Sumatra, I taught a sociolinguistics course in English to undergraduate students who were studying to be English teachers. Two goals were to help the students gain a basic foundation in the subject and help them further develop their spoken and written English. These were challenging goals, because while the students were eager to improve their content and language skills, they rarely used English outside the classroom. Additionally, students in Indonesian classrooms are expected to repeat the knowledge they receive from textbooks or teachers and not

necessarily reveal much of their own personal experiences. In order to address these obstacles, I drew on my past experience and realization that students generally respond well to writing about their own social reality and do not find it as difficult as other kinds of academic tasks. For Kumaravadivelu (2001), this type of teaching contributes to a *pedagogy of particularity*—in other words, a way of teaching that is sensitive to local conditions. For many students, being asked about their own languages, backgrounds, and learning in the following assignment was a novel and welcome experience.

The *My Languages* assignment

Description

In this assignment for my sociolinguistics class, the students wrote in English about their own multilingualism and explained how it related to the linguistic realities of Indonesian society. The students had several weeks to complete this assignment. Following are four instructions they used to guide their writing:

1. List the languages and dialects that you speak.
2. Describe how well you speak them.
3. Specify in which domains/situations you use these languages.
4. Give examples of how your speech style changes when speaking about different topics in varying contexts (for example, at home vs. at school), and with different speakers (for example, with peers vs. with teachers).

Insights gained

This task required the students to analyze their use of the languages that they spoke, including Bahasa Indonesia (the national language), English, Javanese, local Batak languages, and Mandarin, as well as the many others in their individual repertoires. The task tied in with class objectives because the kinds of facts and feelings that students wrote about brought sociolinguistics alive for them. Students were able to actively reflect on concepts such as *lingua franca, prestige language,* and *national language*, among others. Students were expected to use academic English in their writing, including terminology specific to sociolinguistics, in order to develop their overall understanding in the context of their own multilingualism. They

worked in groups to read, respond to, and correct each other's work before handing in the assignment. Several students remarked that this assignment helped them better understand the writing process. The students' responses also included many perceptive observations about the national language and the local and regional varieties in Indonesia, as well as other foreign languages in which they had some degree of fluency. Some students reported that they were nervous to speak English in front of their friends or the teacher, while others recognized that loss of language ability occurs through non-use and that they need to seek out opportunities to actively use their various languages in order to retain and further develop them.

When students reflected on the writing assignment they saw the degree to which they had improved over the course of four months and appreciated that they could now add English composition to their previous linguistic repertoire. Although this assignment was used at the end of a course, a similar lesson might be used at the beginning of a class to diagnose proficiency in different language skills or to determine the degree of students' language awareness. For example, specific questions about vocabulary in the students' different languages would provide useful information about English proficiency and indicate the English language skills that need the most attention. Teachers could also extend such activities to see what students know about English language variation in different countries (Takagaki 2005). This will lead students to understand that they already have a lot of information about different languages and equip them to be effective language learners now and in the future.

Additional language awareness lessons

Linguistic awareness activities are also appropriate for primary, middle, and high school EFL students, and there are many ways to draw on their linguistic, cultural, and sociolinguistic knowledge in order to enhance EFL instruction. Following are some activities that can be used or adapted for use with multilingual students at various ages and levels of proficiency. These ideas are a starting point for teachers to draw on their students' multilingual abilities in the EFL classroom.

Lessons for older students who are more fluent in English can be conducted entirely or nearly entirely in English. The use of the native languages, when appropriate, should be primarily for helping students become aware of language and language learning skills they already possess and for comparison with English language structures and functions.

Activities for primary school students

Primary school activity 1: *Is That Right?*

Pre-activity: Vocabulary Building

The teacher shows pictures of animals, colors, and familiar objects and identifies them in English. After modeling the correct answer, the teacher asks, "What is this called in your language?" The teacher then calls attention to any similarities or cognates (for example, French "bleu" with English "blue," or Tagalog "pulis" with English "police") and differences in pronunciation (such as the sound of "a" in "about," which is the important schwa reduced vowel sound in English). The teacher can also demonstrate verbs like "walk," "run," "hop," and "crawl" while mimicking the action and providing the word in English.

Main activity

The teacher reads a story that contains some of the vocabulary that has been introduced, preferably using a big book or large drawing so all the students can see the pictures and words and hear the words in English. A good book for young students is *Who Hops*, by Davis (2001), in which a verb is given and animals that perform the verb are listed, as well as one animal that does not ("Frogs hop. Rabbits hop… Cows hop—No, they don't").

Follow-up activities

In English, the teacher introduces certain colors and verbs, along with the names of animals and objects that are found in the students' environment but not in the book. The students then identify which animals or objects are red and which are not, which animals crawl and which do not, and so on. The students work in small groups and either draw a picture or make a short skit for the other students, incorporating words and phrases they have learned.

Assessment

The students can identify additional animal characteristics for homework or hand in a short piece of writing they compose the next day during the beginning of class.

Outcomes
- Students recognize similarities and differences between English words and those they know in other languages.
- Students add age- and level-appropriate words to their English vocabulary.
- Students demonstrate understanding of words, phrases, and grammar in English by comparing and contrasting structures among different languages.
- Students apply critical thinking skills by analyzing different language structures in context.

Primary school activity 2: *All in the Family*

Pre-activity: Vocabulary Building

The teacher asks students to brainstorm about the words they use to describe their families and relatives and writes the terms for family relationships on the board (e.g., brothers, sisters, mother father, aunts, uncles, and grandparents).

Main activity

The teacher uses drawings or labeled pictures to show the students a diagram of a family tree, introducing the English terms for family members. The teacher then points out the family members and describes them using nouns and adjectives in English (e.g., children are *young*, grandparents are *old*). Comparative and superlative forms could also be part of the lesson (e.g., children are *younger*, grandparents are *oldest*). For reading and writing objectives, the teacher hands out a list of adjectives and terms for the different family members. The teacher leads the students in a discussion of how the family relationship terms in English are similar or different from the terms they use in the languages they speak. In the case of differences—for example, if only one term for both "brother" and "sister" is used in the students' first language—the teacher introduces the students to the words "brother" and "sister" in addition to the parallel term "sibling" in English.

Assessment

Each student draws his or her own family tree using the diagrams or ones provided by the teacher. Each student labels the different family members by name. Students work in pairs to make suggestions for changes, additions, or deletions in their partner's diagram while the teacher walks around and monitors the activity. Next, each student presents his or her written diagram to the class and explains the terms on the branches of the family tree. The teacher collects the assignment and assesses overall understanding of the task as well as the correct usage and spelling of the family terms.

Outcomes

- Students use all four skills to compare and contrast terms for family members in English and their first language.
- Students are introduced to basic principles of genealogy by designing and labeling a family tree that includes immediate family members and relatives.
- Students compare their own family tree drawings with those of their classmates and critique and revise the English terms.

Activities for middle school students

Middle school activity 1: *Community Languages*

Pre-activity

The teacher shows the class an English language video or reads an excerpt from a short story or nonfiction piece about a multilingual community somewhere in the world where English is used alongside at least one other language (e.g., a Latino community in the southwestern United States, or an Indian community in London). The video or text should be at an appropriate level. An example of an appropriate work of fiction would be *The House on Mango Street*, by Cisneros (1991).

Main activity

The students work in groups of three or four and use the following questions to brainstorm about the ways different languages are used in their own communities:

1. What languages are used in your country?

2. Who speaks which languages to whom?
3. Where are you likely to hear one language or another?
4. What media do you watch or listen to in which English is used?

The teacher uses a word web graphic organizer that has a topic word or sentence written in a center circle with related words written in circles that radiate out from the center. The teacher models the activity with the class by writing, "What languages are used in your country?" in the center circle of the word web and writes down the student answers in the surrounding circles (e.g., English, Javanese, etc.). (See www.eduplace.com/graphicorganizer/pdf/cluster.pdf for an example of a word web graphic organizer.) Next, the student groups fill in their own graphic organizer using the other questions.

Students then work individually and compile the information on their word webs to compose a first draft of a paragraph in English. The teacher provides the students with a list of words and phrases to use while they are drafting their paragraphs (e.g., "in the market," "with friends," "in my family" for question 3). The teacher circulates and gives feedback to students, offering suggestions that will benefit the entire class. Students revise their paragraphs either in class or as homework.

Assessment

Depending on the level of the class and the extent of their experience with writing, the teacher can assess the activity based on cohesion, coherence, and accuracy. The final paragraphs are displayed on a wall in handwritten form or, if technology permits, the teacher or students scan the paragraphs into a computer and post them on a website.

Follow-up activity

Once the final versions of the paragraphs are finished, students discuss their compositions in English, either in groups or as a whole class. Some questions to lead the discussions include:

- Did all students write about the same languages and uses of these languages?
- What were some differences in the responses?
- How many students wrote about Eng-

lish and how English is used in their community?

This activity works best in a setting where multiple languages are used on a daily basis. However, if one language is used predominantly in the community, the teacher can instruct students to include any foreign languages taught in school on their word webs and in their paragraphs. They can also write about situations where the formal and informal varieties of the language they speak are used (e.g., Do you speak the same to your parents as you do with your friends? If not, how does your language differ from situation to situation?)

Outcomes

- Students create an outline of a language situation based on collaboration with peers.
- Students apply information from an outline to the writing of a paragraph.
- Different accounts of language use in the community are compared and discussed.
- Students revise first drafts based on teacher feedback and create a finished product.

Middle school activity 2: *Grammar Detectives*

Note: This activity requires knowledge of the parts of speech; therefore, students should have intermediate proficiency in English.

Pre-activity

The teacher asks the whole class to name the parts of speech and their function in a sentence (e.g., nouns, pronouns, verbs, prepositions, etc.) and lists the responses on the board.

Main activity

The teacher circulates around the room and points to different objects, such as a window, the floor, and a chair, and asks the students to name them in English. The teacher then points out that the objects are all nouns. The teacher writes or displays the following sentences on the board:

- The queen saw the dog.
- Queen Elizabeth saw the dog.
- Willow is one of Queen Elizabeth's dogs.

- Queen Elizabeth fed Willow.
- Dogs are playful.

The teacher checks comprehension by asking questions such as: What does a queen do? Where does Queen Elizabeth live? What kind of an animal is a dog? What does it mean to be playful? The teacher then asks: "Which words are nouns in the sentences?" After the class identifies all the nouns, the students work together in groups of three to answer the three questions below in a specific amount of time. One person in the group writes the answers, one keeps track of time, and the third reports the answers to the class.

1. Where do you find nouns in English sentences? (At the beginning, middle, or end of a sentence? By themselves or together with something else?)
2. How is this different from where nouns are found in sentences in your own language or other languages you know?
3. Why do some of the nouns in these sentences begin with an uppercase letter and others with a lowercase letter?

Students then discuss their answers as a whole class, which gives them the experience of identifying structural aspects of an English sentence and making comparisons between English and their first language, even if the structures are very similar. The teacher sums up what they learned at the end of the lesson, highlighting the difference between proper nouns and common nouns along with examples of each. Students are then given the following exercise to complete as homework.

Assessment

Directions for homework: Underline all of the nouns in the following five sentences. There are several mistakes in some of the lower- and uppercase letters of the nouns, so rewrite each sentence, making corrections so that the words begin with the correct upper- or lowercase letter.

1. The children traveled to the city of rome on a train.
2. My Brother met the prime minister of Greece last summer.
3. Did you know that my birthday is in june?
4. Spring is a good time to visit central park in new york.

5. The eiffel tower was once the tallest building in the World.

(**Key**):
1. The children traveled to <u>Rome</u> on a <u>train</u>.
2. My <u>brother</u> met the <u>prime minister</u> of <u>Greece</u> last <u>summer</u>.
3. Does <u>Janice</u> know that my <u>birthday</u> is in <u>June</u>?
4. <u>Spring</u> is a good <u>time</u> to visit <u>Central Park</u> in <u>New York</u>.
5. The <u>Eiffel Tower</u> was once the tallest <u>building</u> in the <u>world</u>.

After the homework is corrected and returned, the teacher discusses the assignment with the class, clarifying any questions and reviewing the difference between common and proper nouns.

Options

The focus of the lesson can be any part of speech or any feature of a word, such as prepositions or verb conjugations (e.g., *-ed* or *-ing* verb endings).

Outcomes

- Students analyze a particular aspect of English grammar.
- Students compare a feature of English grammar with that of another language with which they are familiar.
- Students use a cooperative learning structure in group work.
- Students detect and correct errors.

Activity for high school students

High school activity: *Interview Project*

Pre-activity

The teacher shows the class an English language video or hands out an excerpt from a short story or nonfiction piece about a multilingual community somewhere in the world where English is used alongside at least one other language (e.g., a Latino community in the southwestern United States or an Indian community in London.) The video or text should be at an appropriate level. An example of an appropriate work of fiction is *Two Lives: A Memoir*, by Seth (2005).

The students form small groups of no more than four students and discuss their impressions of the video or reading selection in English. Possible questions for discussion include:

1. How common do you think it is to be part of two cultures or speak more than one language?
2. In which parts of the world are people more likely to use several different languages?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of speaking more than one language?

Main activity

The teacher asks the whole class to report what was discussed in their groups. After a brief discussion, the teacher tells students that they will be interviewing someone they know in their family or community who speaks more than one language. If at all possible, one of the languages this person speaks should be English.

Each group is responsible for writing two questions for the interview. They are encouraged to write creative questions that do not just ask for facts, but rather for feelings and opinions. As each group reports their questions, the teacher writes them on the board. Next, the class discusses the wording of the questions and the teacher compiles a final set of questions for the survey. Each student uses the same set of questions for their interviews.

Each student takes a copy of the final survey questions and uses them to conduct an interview with one person, such as a relative, a neighbor, or a teacher. The interview can be conducted in person, by phone, or via e-mail; if by person or phone, the student must take notes, as these will be handed in along with the finished product.

Students use the survey results to write a short essay consisting of a predetermined number of paragraphs. The essay describes the interviewee and summarizes the responses to the questions. To prepare for this writing assignment and see what the end product should look like, students read a sample essay, preferably written and modeled by the teacher. Students are encouraged to write multiple drafts, but the teacher will read only the final version.

Assessment

Students hand in their notes or email messages from the interview, their drafts, and the finished essays. The essays are assessed on the following criteria, which are given to the students beforehand:

- Completeness. The description of the interviewee is described and all questions are asked and answered.
- Reasonably accurate spelling and grammar. The sentences and paragraphs are understandable and the essay is coherent.
- Accurate information. The summary accurately reflects what the interviewee said.

The teacher can adjust these criteria according to the proficiency level of the students and the course objectives.

Outcomes
- Students discuss an English language video or a reading selection.
- Students collaborate with peers to write interview questions.
- Students conduct interviews and summarize the responses in an essay.

Activity for college students/adult learners

College activity: *Speech Acts: What Words Can Do*

Pre-activity

Students view a scene from an English language movie or read a scene from a short story or a play in which the characters engage in one or more speech acts (requesting, demanding, refusing, begging, apologizing, etc.). Afterward, the teacher holds a short discussion with the whole class to make sure there is a general understanding of what took place in the scene.

Main activity

The students form groups of three or four. Each group receives an envelope that contains pieces of paper on which "wh–" questions are written: For example:

- Why did Olivia refuse to go with David?
- When did Olivia arrive at the castle?

- What do you think will happen next?
- Where were the characters at the beginning of the scene?

Each member of the group selects one question from the envelope and answers it for the group; if necessary, the student can get help from the other members.

After the small groups have discussed each question, students in the class who have the same "wh–" question form their own group—for example, all students holding a "why" question meet to discuss their responses and to note any similarities or differences.

Follow-up activities

Students write a one-page reflection on whether they thought the characters in the movie or book acted appropriately and whether they (the students) would have behaved differently. The teacher provides an example of a simple prompt that helps students understand the assignment, such as "Do you agree with how Olivia treated David? What would you have done in the same situation, and why?"

The teacher, responding to the content and not the form, uses the individual written reflections to initiate class discussion of cultural and personality differences. The student reactions inform the discussion; if they are very different, a guided debate might be appropriate. If student reactions are similar, the teacher acts as devil's advocate, taking an opposite viewpoint to instigate further discussion.

Assessment

The students are assessed on their group participation and on the quality of ideas presented in written and oral form.

Outcomes
- Students discuss a viewing/reading selection in which particular speech acts are performed.
- Students answer "wh–" questions and discuss their responses in two different groups.
- Students analyze a scene or particular characters from their own personal viewpoint.
- Students write reflections that the teacher uses to initiate further discussion.

Conclusion

Many foreign language classrooms contain multilingual students who want to add English to the languages they already speak. However, since these students are not always able to realize their strengths as multilinguals and "bring one language to another," they often need guidance to develop their language awareness and find ways to apply their linguistic and pragmatic knowledge to the learning of the new language. The EFL teacher's indispensable role is to underscore and actively make use of the abilities that multilingual students already possess.

The activities presented here are only a few ways to build language awareness, and can be adjusted for the students' age, their level of proficiency, and even the number of languages being compared or discussed at one time. Such activities can be used at the beginning, middle, or end of the term or year to help teachers better connect with students' lives and experiences and enrich their methods and techniques.

The common thread that runs throughout this teaching approach is that the study of English is combined with an awareness of and an appreciation for the other languages in students' lives. In this way, learners can see how languages are similar and how they are different, and how—in a broad sense—they themselves are successful speakers and writers of language.

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