

Using Multilingualism as a Resource in the Class

Multilingualism may be used as a valuable resource for enhanced teaching learning in a second language classroom. The learners may be helped to gain a basic foundation in the subject and further develop their spoken and written English. While most of the students of countries which consist of non-native speakers of English, are mostly eager to improve their content and language skills, they rarely use English outside the classroom. Students of countries like India and South East Asian countries are also expected to repeat the knowledge they receive from textbooks or teachers and not necessarily reveal much of their own personal experiences. The teacher may innovate tasks to use multilingualism as a resource based on the psychological principle that the learners love to talk about their own varied social experiences and that the students generally respond well to writing about their own social reality. They 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 may prove to be a novel and welcome experience.

The learners may be urged to write in English about their own multilingualism and explain how it related to the linguistic realities of their socio-cultural context. Four instructions may be given 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). This task would compel students to reflect upon and analyze their use of the languages that they spoke, including Bengali including its multiple variations, English, Hindi, other local languages (if any) in their individual repertoires. Such tasks would integrate with class objectives because the kinds of facts and feelings that students would think about bring sociolinguistics alive for them. Students would be able to actively reflect on concepts such as *lingua franca*, *prestige language*, and *national language*, among others. Students would be 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 may be urged to work in groups to read, respond to, and correct each other's work before handing in the assignment. Such an assignment would help them to understand the writing process better. The students may respond in form of many perceptive observations about the national language and the local and regional varieties, as well as other foreign languages in which they have some degree of fluency. Some students are nervous to speak English in front of their friends or the teacher, while others experience loss of language ability that occurs through non-use and may only be revived if the learners get opportunities to actively use their various languages in order to retain and further develop them. Such exercises allows the learners to integrate English composition to their previous linguistic repertoire. 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 English second language students, and there are many ways to draw on their linguistic, cultural, and sociolinguistic knowledge in order to enhance English second language 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 English second language 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.

Various other activities may be used to utilize multilingualism as a resource in the classroom. Some such activities have been cited by scholars like **Joyce Milambiling**, University of Central Iowa(2011). The teacher may show the class an English language video or read 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 south-western United States, or an Indian community in London).

The video or text should be at an appropriate level commensurate with the age and abilities of the learners. The students may 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 should model the activity with the class by writing, “What languages are used in your country?” in the center circle of the word web and by writing down the student answers in the surrounding circles (e.g., English, Bengali, Hindi etc.). Next, the student groups may be urged to fill in their own graphic organizer using the other questions. Students then must work individually and compile the information on their word webs to compose a first draft of a paragraph in English. The teacher should provide 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 may circulate and give feedback to students, offering suggestions that will benefit the entire class. Students revise their paragraphs either in class or as homework. 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. Once the final versions of the paragraphs are finished, students may 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 people use English and how is English 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 they speak the same to their parents as they do with their friends? If not, how does your language differ from situation to situation?). Students may create an outline of a language situation based on collaboration with peers. Students can apply

information from an outline to the writing of a paragraph. Different accounts of language use in the community are compared and discussed. Students may revise first drafts based on teacher feedback and create a finished product. 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 they speak the same to their parents as they do with their friends? If not, how does your language differ from situation to situation?). Students may create an outline of a language situation based on collaboration with peers. Students can apply information from an outline to the writing of a paragraph. Different accounts of language use in the community are compared and discussed. Students may revise first drafts based on teacher feedback and create a finished product.

Other secondary school level activities based on Grammar may also be designed using multilingualism as a resource in the English class. Such an activity requires knowledge of the parts of speech and therefore, students should have intermediate proficiency in English. 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. The teacher may move around the room and point to different objects, such as a window, the floor, and a chair, and ask the students to name them in English. The teacher then may point out that the objects are all nouns. The teacher can write or display the following sentences on the board:

- The child saw the balloon.
- Pritha saw the balloon.
- Tommy is one of Pritha's dogs.
- Pritha fed Tommy.
- Dogs are playful.

The teacher then would check comprehension by asking questions such as, what the children do on seeing dogs, what kind of an animal a dog is, what it means to be playful and so on. The teacher may then ask the students to find out which words in the sentences are nouns. After the class identifies all the nouns, the students may 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 can 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 may then be given an exercise to complete as homework, which consists of underlining all of the nouns in five sentences. There would be several mistakes in some of the lower- and uppercase letters of the nouns and the learners would have to rewrite each sentence, making corrections so that the words begin with the correct upper or lowercase letter.

Again, the teacher may show 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. The students may be made to 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 may 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?

The teacher may ask the whole class to report what was discussed in their groups. After a brief discussion, the teacher could tell students that they would 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 would be responsible for writing two questions for the interview. They may be 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 would write them on the board. Next, the class may discuss the wording of the questions and the teacher would compile a final set of questions for the survey. Each student may use the same set of questions for their interviews. Each student may take a copy of the final survey questions and use 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

conducted by person or phone, the student must take notes, as these will be handed in along with the finished product. Students may use the survey results to write a short essay consisting of a predetermined number of paragraphs. The essay should describe the interviewee and summarize the responses to the questions. To prepare for this writing assignment and see what the end product should look like, students may read a sample essay, preferably written and modelled by the teacher. Students may be encouraged to write multiple drafts, but the teacher will read only the final version.

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 English second language teacher’s indispensable role is to underscore and actively make use of the abilities that multilingual students already possess. The activities discussed above 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 they themselves are successful speakers and writers of language in a broad sense.