
USING MULTILINGUALISM TO ADVANTAGE IN ENGLISH DEPARTMENT CLASSES

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Abstract

English department students at Padang State University are both multilingual and heading into a multilingual world and workplaces. Prudent use can be made of their previous and on-going experience of language acquisition when teaching English. Four strategies are described. For grammar/speaking classes brief comparative analysis of a problematic English sentence structure with other languages can be made. For pronunciation classes, sounds where errors are frequently found can be taught by looking for any allophonic equivalent from another language available in the classroom. For vocabulary and translation classes the mis-match between lexical concepts in languages the students are familiar with can be exploited to help students deal with that concept in English. Student experience of multiple language-based identities can be used in the cross-cultural communication classroom can provide a stepping stone to interacting across different languages and cultures. (137 words)

keywords - multilingualism, comparative analysis, language concept

1. INTRODUCTION

What does multilingualism mean in the English dept UNP?

In most of the classes about 80% of the students are bilingual Indonesian and Minang speakers, the rest speak Indonesian and another local language. A few speak two local languages. Most of them have studied some Arabic. For all of them English is quickly becoming their dominant foreign language. Some are following the current craze of learning Korean or Japanese. The lecturers in the English department are similarly multilingual. Many of these students hope to obtain jobs in sectors on Indonesia or abroad where English is used more than Indonesian or any local language.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED THEORIES

There is more than one definition of multilingualism in the literature. In the 1980s and 1990s a person or an area using three or more languages was considered multilingual.ⁱ A brief glance at Wikipedia reveals that bilingualism and multilingualism are not always clearly differentiated.ⁱⁱ This is probably because in the New World American linguists and educators are working with bilingual communities and there is no equivalent of the common European experience of knowing and speaking the languages of all the countries surrounding one's own.

Harmer reminds us that the majority of English-language conversations in the world take place between people, neither of whom have English as a first language.ⁱⁱⁱ This is another aspect of multilingualism.

There is much literature pointing out the advantages, neurological, economic and otherwise of being able to use more than one language. Bialystok has written extensively about the benefits of bilingualism to brain efficiency, using the term (cognitive) executive function.^{iv}

A corollary of students' multilingualism is that they bring their previous language-learning experience and strategies into the English language classroom. In learner-centred teaching much use can be made of these. Reflexivity, a property of human language, means that language can be used to analyze and discuss language. In the case of multilingual students and classrooms there may be an explicit awareness of language which can be exploited as teachers encourage to students to work with English at greater cognitive depth. Students can contribute from their already extensive knowledge about language in general and specific languages in particular. Multilingualism is a strength and a resource ready to be mined. When teaching we notice that students gain confidence as they realize they have valuable insights to share in the English class.

Canagarajah uses the word 'multilingual' specifically as a term for a non-native English teacher.^v This introduces a different focus to the topic of multilingualism, and although very interesting, is not the issue of this seminar.

Purpose

In Padang our English students use Indonesian, Minang and other local languages, and English and perhaps one or more other international languages daily. In regard to their future careers, our students are realizing the increased employment prospects for multilinguals. Furthermore, the reason teaching English is vital is that the world is multilingual and the dominant lingua franca at this point in time is English. As was mentioned in last year's ISLA in Padang, in their careers our students will be using English with other non-native speakers of English. In this seminar we are discussing strategies and materials that take into consideration the multilingual experience and future of our students. This is the multilingual context, where both speaker and hearer speak two or more other languages but English is the only one they have in common, or it is the language for the particular activity they are working on together. This is the aspect I will focus on in this paper.

Strategies

In English as a Second/Foreign Language classes in Australia, classes are heterogeneous with students whose first languages are Chinese, Vietnamese, Arabic, Russian, Spanish etc. One advantage of this is that the learners must communicate with each other using English as that is the only language they have in common. In Padang students all have Indonesian as a language in common, as well as their growing command of English. In addition most of them will be fluent in one or more local languages. They do not all know the same local languages, though use of Minang is dominant.

Grammar/speaking

It is possible to teach English linguistics, language, culture and literature without any reference to another language. However many language features are more readily understood and explained when compared with another language the students already know or are acquiring. For example, the passive in English is not used as commonly as it is in Indonesian. Most grammar teachers would at least mention this when teaching the passive. Minang uses even more passive and this can show up in their English, for example using passive when active would more usually be used. When students have both Indonesian and Minang they can be encouraged to explore the linguistic differences between them, and then between those languages and English. Where English word order is markedly different from a language the students use regularly, this would be worth pointing out.

Pronunciation

A contrastive analysis approach does not explain all pronunciation errors, but it does explain some of them.^{vi} When planning a teaching program for English pronunciation both error analysis and a contrastive phonemic analysis would be necessary

steps. Then a teaching order would be decided on, taking into account the functional load and frequency of each English phoneme.^{vii}

English consonant phonemic distribution

	<i>bilabial</i>	<i>labio-dental</i>	<i>dental</i>	<i>alveolar</i>	<i>post-alveolar</i>	<i>palatal</i>	<i>velar</i>	<i>glottal</i>
stop	p b			t d			k g	
fricative		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ			h
affricate					tʃ dʒ			
nasal		m		n			ŋ	
lateral				l				
contin.		w		r		j		
trill/flap								

Not found in initial position in words - ŋ

Not found in final position in words - w, j, h

Indonesian consonant phonemic distribution

	<i>bilabial</i>	<i>labio-dental</i>	<i>dental</i>	<i>alveolar</i>	<i>post-alveolar</i>	<i>palatal</i>	<i>velar</i>	<i>glottal</i>
stop	p b			t d	t̚ d̚		k g	ʔ
fricative		[f] [v]		s [z]	[ʃ] [ʒ]		[x]	h
affricate								
nasal		m		n	ɲ		ŋ	
lateral				l				
contin.		w				j		
trill/flap				r				

Not found in word-final position - b, d, g, t̚, d̚, ɲ [v], [x], [z] [ʃ]

key [] = sounds borrowed from Arabic or Dutch

t̚ = laminal and affricated t^{viii}

When the two charts are compared the English consonants unfamiliar to Indonesian-speakers can be isolated. In fact the sounds [f] [v] [z] [ʃ] and [x] borrowed from Arabic or Dutch show a variety of realizations, some of which are different phonemes in English, causing confusion for the hearer.^{ix} If phonemic charts for English and Indonesian consonants are compared, Indonesian does not have dental fricatives and indeed our experience as English teachers shows that [θ] and [ð] often prove difficult for Indonesian first-language speakers. The English affricates also show up regularly in error analyses^x.

Minangkabau consonant phonemic distribution

	<i>bilabial</i>	<i>labio-dental</i>	<i>dental</i>	<i>alveolar</i>	<i>post-alveolar</i>	<i>palatal</i>	<i>velar</i>	<i>glottal</i>
stop	p b			t d	t̚ d̚		k g	ʔ
fricative				s				h
affricate								
nasal		m		n	ɲ		ŋ	
lateral				l				
contin.		w				j		
trill/flap				r				

Not found in word-initial position - h

Not found in word-final position - l, r, s

When speaking in English Minang speakers may produce p instead of f and v, ɲ instead of z and ð.^{xi}

The advantage of a multilingual classroom is that sounds from languages spoken by anyone in the class can be used to help teach the problematic English sounds. For example some speakers of Minang use a non-trilled 'r'; a student familiar with this sound can help explain and demonstrate this non-trilled sound. Students who have learnt a lot of

Arabic can draw on that knowledge to practise pronunciation of English dental fricatives. A student who was a graduate of an Islamic boarding school first brought this to my attention.

There isn't time and space here to discuss how knowledge of other aspects of phonology of each language available in the classroom can contribute to analyzing and then addressing errors found. For example first language syllable structure may influence production of English consonant clusters.

Vocabulary/translation

Often as students progress through high school English classes there comes a moment when they realize that languages map the same reality somewhat differently. In particular, exact equivalents between English and Indonesian do not always exist. An 'ibu' is not always a 'mother', or a 'mak' for that matter. A meal in English is not always rice, as it is in most parts of Indonesia. 'Fat' has a different connotation than 'gemuk' or Minang 'gapuak'. This knowledge is essential for learning to think in another language, which is an important part of higher-level language learning.^{xiii} Student and English teacher access to other languages can be used to firstly explain this concept of different mappings and secondly to give relevant insights which then help students build up vocabulary. Greetings, kinship terms, use of titles, use of personal pronouns, small talk, taboo topics, compliments are notoriously difficult to translate as the concepts behind them are understood differently in another language.

Cross-cultural understanding

Students' experiences of different first languages and cultures can be used to present these varying ways of understanding reality. In Cross-Cultural Understanding classes for example students using Minang to sort color swatches will get a different result than students using Batak or Javanese. This can then be compared with English. 'Blue' may belong to 'green' or 'black' in other languages.

Most of our students are already living with Minang matrilinearity and Indonesian patrilinearity. This can be used to introduce the variety of ways of dealing with issues of identity found in English-language literature.

A vital part of CCU is that students have an experience of realizing that not everyone sees the world the way they do, and this is sometimes difficult to teach in more homogenous societies/classes. Multilingual students, at least theoretically, already have the ability to see the world from two viewpoints. I have heard people say 'as an Indonesian I think..... but as a Javanese I think.....' This ability can be extended as they are prepared to function also in the relatively unfamiliar worlds of non-Indonesian English speakers. Of course in CCU we are talking about multicultural rather than strictly multilingual, but that is a paper for another day.

3. CONCLUSION AND CONSIDERATIONS

Multilingualism can be used to advantage in English language classes. A language teacher does not want to spend the bulk of the time available contrasting languages, except perhaps in some of the linguistics classes. It would also be inappropriate to only use examples from Minang when some students do not speak Minang. Nevertheless, judicious use and elicitation of examples from any of the languages students are familiar with can help students grasp their 'new way of doing things with words', that is, with their English.

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