



TeachingEnglish

British Council: TeachingEnglish

A podcast series for teachers
of English



**Episode 8: How can I use
different languages in my
teaching?**

Transcript



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Duration: 0:33:34

Chris: Hello, and welcome to Teaching English with the British Council, a podcast in which we try and provide solutions to some of the key questions being asked by English teachers around the world.

Chris: I'm your host, Chris Sowton. In each episode, we address one such question and attempt to answer it in two ways.

In the first part of each episode, we hear from a British Council project, programme or publication about something which is being done to address this issue. Across the 10 episodes of the series, we hear from teachers, trainers and researchers in a wide range of contexts, including India, Lebanon, Uruguay, and South Africa.

In the second part, a leading English expert and practitioner will provide practical solutions which you can immediately try out wherever you work. Each episode of Teaching English is accompanied by a full transcript and show notes. These show notes provide additional information, a glossary of keywords and links to relevant websites.

Chris: Welcome to Episode 8 of Teaching English with the British Council, in which we will try to answer the question: How can I use different languages in my teaching? The majority of people in the world are – to some degree – multilingual. In the classroom, however, languages are often seen as a problem rather than a resource. This has a considerable, and usually negative, impact on children's learning experiences and learning outcomes. In this episode, therefore, we explore the *opportunities* which a multilingual approach to learning can offer.

First, in our field report, we look at a British Council publication from 2019 entitled *Using multilingual approaches: moving from theory to practice* – A resource book of strategies, activities and projects for the classroom.

This excellent resource book contains a wide range of practical activities for teachers who teach English as a subject as well as for teachers who use English as the medium of instruction in classrooms with students in multilingual societies. The introduction makes clear the British Council's own policy towards multilingual approaches in the teaching of English. It states that the British Council sees its role as *supporting* English as a language *in addition to* the languages spoken by individuals, not instead of them.

English should be seen in the context of multilingualism rather than as a dominant or domineering language.

And so, without further ado, let's hear from Mei, Sue and Kerry, three of the publication's authors, about multilingual activities which you can use in your classroom.

Sue: Hi my name is Sue Ollerhead. I'm a teacher and researcher from Sydney Australia, but I've worked as a language teacher in South Africa, Egypt and the United Kingdom. My activities relate to the project: Our Multilingual Class. The first step towards getting students to use all of their multilingual resources for learning is to have them understand that the languages they speak are a strength and a potential aid, rather than a barrier to learning.

A significant finding of my research over the years is that many multilingual students are initially reluctant to use anything but the language of instruction in the classroom. Having been conditioned to view the classroom as an English only zone in the case of Australia, where the use of their mother tongue is seen as somehow subversive or deviant. A good place to start is for teachers themselves to learn more about students languages and to show respect for them. Also, to give students ways of thinking and talking about their languages to each other, we call this developing a healthy multilingual ecology in the classroom. When students languages are an active part of the classroom they can be valuable resources for connecting with prior knowledge and learning new concepts. As a teacher, the first step is to talk to students in the languages *you* know. So I might start a lesson by greeting students in Xhosa, one of the most widely spoken language in South Africa. Then I might continue in Afrikaans.

I'd encourage students to ask questions about the languages I speak. Such as: did I learn them at school? Who do I speak them with? How do you make the click sound in Xhosa? How do you make the throat sound in Afrikaans?

You could ask a student to name a language they speak and then ask the class to put their hand up if they also speak that language. For example, you could say Sonani speaks Hindi put your hand up if you also speak Hindi? Continue until you've included all the languages in the class. Ask students, how they use languages differently with different people. For example, with friends or strangers, siblings, parents or grandparents, in the classroom or the playground. You could ask students to keep a tally of the classes languages on the board or in their notes.

The next step would be a guided writing activity called Find Someone Who. For this activity, you would need to prepare a handout with a table on it with four columns. In the left-hand column would be your Find Someone Who sentences. Such as: find someone who speaks more than one language, find someone who reads and writes more than one language, find someone who knows the same language as you, and so on. The second column would be used to write down the students name with a sentence applies to, the third would be used to record the names of the languages the

students speak, for example: Portuguese, Spanish, Swahili and so on. The final column, to be used to record any other information that the student they spoke to told them, such as they like songs in Portuguese but they prefer to read and speak Spanish and so on. For an example of what the table should look like you can refer to page 48 in our Multilingual Approaches book. Explain to students that they need to move around the room and asked other students about their languages. They should fill in the table without speaking to the same student twice so that they speak to as many people as possible. And that they can speak and write the answers in any languages, even though the table might be written in English. Finally, students can use their computer tables to write sentences about three of their classmates such as: Sonani speaks Hindi at home, but English at school, she sometimes like to watch films with French subtitles. They can also write sentences about themselves, such as: I am multilingual, I know three languages, I can speak Hindi, English and French, and so on.

To consolidate students' reflections on their class's multilingualism the final activity of this project gets students to represent their linguistic repertoires visually. For this, you will need large sheets of paper or card for each student, some coloured pencils and markers. Place students in groups of four to six and ask them to list on the paper what language they use every day, where and how they use them and the type of languages they use, what language varieties, how formal or informal and so on. You can display the groups' lists on the classroom walls and get students to walk around the room and look at them. Students can then work on their own language maps, they should include as much detail as possible in a way that represents their personalities and feelings. So a student's map may reflect that they speak Persian with friends and family and English at school, they may watch Urdu and Hindi TV shows, use English for social media and so on. Encourage students to use their creativity to present their language use in a way that is meaningful for them. Students can then share their language maps with the rest of the class, they can explain and describe their maps and ask and answer questions using home languages and English. Finally, the completed language maps can be displayed in the classroom you could invite other teachers, students and parents to view them. These language maps are not simply classroom decorations but they act as a textual landscape that represents the full range of your class's language practices and they're truly emblematic of their rich multilingual identity.

Mei: I'm going to talk about the project My Name and my name is Mei French. This activity is built on the understanding that learners of English as an additional language, are adding to their multilingual repertoires, their toolkit of skills connected to all the languages they know. Our names can connect us to cultural, linguistic and family heritage. Respecting each other includes understanding and pronouncing students' names correctly. This helps to build productive relationships and a multilingual stance in the classroom. If we talk about our names, each person will be an expert in their own way and will have a different story to tell so that students and teachers can learn about, and learn from, each other. Modelling the text is a good way to begin this project as the teacher prepare a short presentation on your name. When I present my name, I like to show the characters in Chinese and the spelling in English and explain their meaning in

origin. I also like to talk about what my name would have been if I was born a boy, and how sometimes I use nicknames with close family or friends or different for social media. After this, there's an optional opportunity to discuss the social implications of getting people's names right or wrong this might include experiences your students have had, or this might be a discussion you save for later.

Next, students can think of different questions about names they might like to find out for themselves. I like to ask students to talk about this in small groups using any language they feel comfortable. Each group can then share their three best questions with the whole class in English. From the class set, students can choose, say five to seven questions to answer about their own names. They might need to translate some questions into their family languages so they can ask about them at home. Once students have gathered information, they can organise it into a presentation it's useful for students to prepare a short speech and a visual support. Depending on your student's developing level of English, you might provide sentence structures or a template for them to follow. The book is designed to support teachers in low resource contexts so students might display their information on a piece of paper or on the blackboard. But in well-resourced classrooms, students might be able to prepare an electronic slideshow for example. Once students have prepared, checked and practiced their presentation, the last main step is to share it with the class. There are a lot of ways of presenting to the class which could include each student taking a turn to speak to the whole class, or students speaking to each other in smaller groups. In well-resourced contexts you could use audio or video recordings too. I like to follow up presentations with a short question and answer session or a class discussion. Some of the things students might talk about is what they've learned about themselves and each other, and suggestions about how to use their language skills in other activities.

You might already be thinking about how to adapt this project to your class. I've done this activity with students of many different ages, including primary, secondary and university students and with teachers. I've also done this with students from different language and educational backgrounds, including students with a lot of prior education or only a little, students with refugee experience, international students and even monolingual English speaking students, including in very mixed classes. Students could teach their classmates to introduce themselves in different languages. You can adapt the complexity of your model text, and the students visual and oral presentations to suit the English level of your students. You can use different technologies in the presentation depending on what you have available. With students with more developed English you could have more in-depth discussion of the significance of names. In 2020, American vice president Kamala Harris talked about people mispronouncing her name, she said: "the name is the first gift a child usually receives from the family. It is usually informed by tradition and love and the hope and aspiration the family has for that child. It's something precious and sacred, and they're just part of their identity. When I see people fighting for the right for that to be respected, I applaud and salute that."

Kerry: Hello, I'm Kerry Taylor-Leech and I'm a language teacher at Griffith University in Queensland. I've taught in Europe, Africa, and Asia as well as the UK and Australia. A key aspect of inclusive teaching is choosing topics that engage ALL our learners, from ALL linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Festivals are a universal way we celebrate our languages, cultures, and traditions. They add structure to our social lives, connect us with our families and help build our sense of who we are. In short, festivals bring us together. And, of course, they are often a source of delight and entertainment, especially for children. Behind me, is a picture of the fireworks display that takes place every year on the famous Sydney Harbour Bridge in Australia, where I live and work. As part of the resources, we've developed on teaching English multilingually, I'd like to share with you some ideas for teaching activities that can be developed around the topic of festivals. The topic of festivals provides easy-to-find resources that teachers can use to arouse students' interest. Students will have background knowledge and experiences they can draw on to communicate. Activate this knowledge by taking into class an artefact or picture associated with the festival you have chosen. Ask the students to tell you what they see, think, and want to know about the artefact or picture, and identify the festival. They can use English or the relevant home languages for this. Collate the words they give you on the board or a word wall. You can have a table or a Venn diagram for words in English, the home language, and the local and national language, as appropriate. Students can write the words into their notebooks. Use these words to have the students take turns to ask and answer questions about the festival in pairs. You can make a handout with question prompts to support them. When the students have shared all the information, have them compose sentences about the festival. You can give them sentence starters to help them. They can try this in English but let them use their home languages if it helps them feel more confident. In this way, they can produce parallel written texts in English and the home language. Prompt them to check each other's English grammar and compare how their families celebrate. Have them discuss in the home language what's the same and what's different in each family. Have the students then prepare a short presentation to the class in English about how their family celebrates the festival and let them draw a picture if they like. The pictures and texts can be displayed as a gallery around the classroom. In a follow-up activity, students can walk around and match the pictures to the texts. You can vary the grammar you want students to use in this activity, according to their level and ability and of course their confidence in English. Topics that are linguistically and culturally inclusive can be motivating and enjoyable for both teachers and students, so get your creative juices flowing. Good luck!

Chris: Thanks to all the contributors to the field report and for their practical advice about how you can make your classroom a more positive multilingual space. As ever, please remember that you can access a full transcript and show notes from the British Council website.

For this episode's interview, I'm delighted to welcome Tony Capstick. Tony Capstick is an Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Reading in the UK. He

has also researched and written widely on issues such as teacher education, multilingualism and migration. Tony Welcome to Teaching English.

Tony: Hi, Chris. Good to be with you.

Chris: So Tony in the introduction I described you as an Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics, this term might be unfamiliar to some of our listeners could you give a brief summary of what it means?

Tony: Linguistics is the study of language and the applied part of Applied Linguistics means applying it to specific settings. So taking what we know about how people use and learn languages and trying to explore that through particular situations or settings or classrooms or workplaces. So we draw from a range of different areas of linguistics, but always try to put them within that context. So for me I'm an applied linguist who's interested in classrooms particularly as well other settings where learning occurs. So for me, I take what we know from years of research, looking at language learning and language use from different communities. And I try to use that evidence to understand current day classrooms. So classrooms that are changing because of things like pandemics, technology, so how do these real-world events, how do we adapt them to the current situation that teachers face?

Chris: And many of the settings that you work in are multilingual. Could you perhaps summarise the importance and value of multilingual education especially with regards to learning languages?

Tony: Multilingual education is a very broad term. We can use it to describe any kind of formal or informal learning which takes place by drawing on the linguistic resources so the different languages and the different styles and registers and genres of language that learners and teachers bring with them to that learning situation. So it could be the teaching of mathematics or social studies or English language, but it's basically helping learners develop their knowledge or skills in those different subject areas by drawing on the different languages that they have that are familiar to them, and also might be new to them. So bringing that, those linguistic resources together in order to learn better.

Chris: And why does that help students learn better because in many parts of the world, there is resistance to using many languages within an education system, we see in many places English being the dominant language used or other important or dominant languages. So what is the value of using those language resources that you talk about?

Tony: There's many different benefits to a multilingual approach to education. One of them is the value that comes from allowing students to build on what they can already do with language. So some students may see themselves as monolingual. They may only speak English for example, and yet they're able to do things in different styles, different registers and different genres of English. They're able to move from social

media to academic genres. So even your monolingual learner has access to these different resources, but the world is far more multilingual than that. And so many learners and teachers will have more than one language variety in their repertoire, in their collection of linguistic resources. And so multilingual education allows them to draw from those different resources, those different languages and use them to build knowledge, new knowledge or to build on existing knowledge. It also helps them to tap into their cultural resources, language and culture can in many ways be seen as a single entity, a single thing. It's difficult to separate out language from culture. And so when we draw from our different languages, we're also drawing from our different cultural practices and our different cultural heritage.

Chris: There's arguments that if students are learning in language, which is familiar to them, then they feel safer in the classroom as well, which, so there are additional benefits in that respect too

Tony: That's right. That's so important about how we understand an environment where learners are ready to learn, like you say if they feel safe, if they feel as though that classroom or that online setting is somewhere that they can experiment, is somewhere where they feel confident, talking to their partners or talking to the teacher in a familiar language, they're far more likely to feel confident enough then to maybe try out some of the target language if they're learning English. And so feeling supported and feeling as though their different languages are respected is a really important way of not only developing rapport between the students and the teacher, but also as you say, trying to help them, to make help them to feel safe, and to feel as though their different identities and their different cultural practices are valued.

Chris: Because those, like you say, those cultural identities aren't necessarily valued within the textbook or they're not even represented within the textbook. So allowing that within the four walls of the classroom might be the only, you might say valorisation of their identity that those students are getting.

Tony: That's absolutely right. Yeah, teachers have to do a lot of work sometimes when they've got a set textbook, or they've got material that they may not have had a lot of control over choosing, and yet they're the ones that are responsible for getting the students to engage with those texts. So there's a lot of additional support that teachers can bring to that teaching process.

Chris: What are some of the ways, Tony, that you could advise teachers working in those sorts of settings, what kind of multilingual techniques or multilingual practices can they use in the classroom to access the language resources which you say exist?

Tony: One of the first places teachers can start is by ensuring that they are familiar with the different language resources in a particular classroom, that the class that they're working with. So we know that teachers often are faced with very multilingual settings if they live in a part of the world where there's been displacement or migration

then there may be different language groups in the room, if they're in more sedentary settings in there, if they're in classrooms where there's not been a huge amount of migration, but there's still variation in the different language backgrounds of the learners. And it's really important that the teacher builds an awareness of what those languages are. So there's some really nice activities that teachers can use. At the beginning, of course, is perhaps to find out what kinds of language backgrounds students have, what kinds of home practices do students have, do they use different varieties at home because maybe they have parents from different language groups, do they use a lot of different styles or genres of language? And are teachers able to maybe bring in some of that awareness into the classroom setting? I mentioned parents, there, parents are really important. They're also a key stakeholder in building a curriculum that allows teachers to harness these different linguistic resources. So getting parents on side so parents become advocates for this, because parents often feel as though they want their children or their teenage, the adolescents in their family to perhaps have this kind of full immersion in English if it's an English language classroom, because that's perceived as high status. And yet we know now from a lot of research, that it's not always beneficial to learners in resource low environments. And then I guess one last strategy is that it's okay for teachers to switch. It's okay for teachers to use these different languages, either at the sentence level, so some people call that code switching, some people call it translanguaging. So you can switch between languages, you're not going to confuse your learners if you do that, because that's absolutely a natural part of their day to day interactions, switching. So you're not doing anything unusual. If anything, you're doing something quite unusual if you only use a language variety that the students aren't fully familiar with. So I think that's another strategy teachers can use.

Chris: It's almost like the classroom is out of sync with their everyday reality, that language is as you say, you, they may be walking home and they hear American English on the television and they speak in one language to their grandparents and speak in another language to their parents or whatever it may be. So it's really seeing language as something more diverse than just one block of language here and one block of language there, it's it's more of a pool of different resources that they draw on...

Tony: That idea of a pool I think is a really useful way of looking at it. Yeah, definitely. That pool isn't just languages, named languages, such as English or Urdu, or Arabic, but it's also a pool of resources as I said before, like styles and registers and genres. We're always switching between different ways of using language, and particularly young people who have access to technologies that old people like me never had access to. And so they're really familiar with, as you say, hearing different accents, working with different ways of expressing oneself through these different resources.

Chris: I think as well in the language learning classroom, lots of teachers, when I do teacher training, they say it's so hard to get my students to speak. I put them into pairs, I give them a task and they stop talking after a few seconds. But I think these sorts of

more multilingual approaches can really help with that because often we asked our students I think, to do things which are cognitively hard and linguistically hard at the same time, and it's no surprise that they don't say anything. So I have found often that teachers say it helps if they say, well do the task first in a language that you choose. That might be the sort of the language, or the first language which all the class share or it might be other languages, then ask them to try and do it in the target language using as much of the target language as possible. So that more sort of graded approach can, can be really beneficial.

Tony: You know, we can break it down into those different steps and they're going to move through them gradually, much more successfully. If the teachers thought through how to get them from well, it's not really from A to B, it might be from A to G with all of the other letters in between.

Chris: One of the challenges, I guess with that, linking back to what you were saying before about parents being important stakeholders and so on is that, if parents or headteachers see some of these multilingual practices in action, they're wondering, well, why is that teacher not teaching in the target language? Why are they not teaching English? That must mean they're a bad teacher? And it can be hard to match up the, what you say the research shows about the value of multilingual education with the reality of what people expect in a social or cultural setting, about what education is for

Tony: I mean we're up against the really strong beliefs and attitudes and assumptions about how learners learn best and there's you know, a long history of colonial language policies that go back many centuries, that installed some of these ways of understanding the relationship between language and learning, and what languages are given status and what languages are given an alphabet and an orthography, and a written mode. All of these things are actually very political, they're political decisions that were made, and we're now seeing the consequences of that when parents, teachers, many people believe that it's, it's better to just focus on the target language. What the research tells us is that something more multilingual is more beneficial.

Chris: And I guess hopefully, one way that this change can happen that students could be the best advocates for this if teachers do adopt those more multilingual practices, and students report back that they're having better learning experiences, but also achieving better learning outcomes, then that will hopefully start that process of changing views on this.

Tony: Yeah, learners tend to enjoy a lesson where they're able to move confidently between not knowing something and knowing something. And so if you're giving them opportunities to use their home languages, then they're going to be in a much stronger position to then move towards developing something that they don't know how to do. If we try only using the target language, we're denying them the opportunity to build on their cultural and linguistic knowledge. Similarly, if learners come from more marginalised backgrounds or backgrounds where they don't feel as though they fit in so

well into that particular classroom or that particular community, then again, we're denying them access to something that they feel attached to.

Chris: Absolutely it all relates to issues, things like epistemic justice, but that's probably for another episode of Teaching English. Thank you very much for your time today Tony, it was great to talk to you.

Tony: Thanks, Chris. Really interesting conversation.

Chris: Tony Capstick, our thanks to him, and to all our contributors this week. As we have seen in this episode, students come to school with their own language skills and repertoires. It's important that these repertoires are considered when planning the language policy at the system or the school level. Education should be open, inclusive and accessible to all and language plays a very significant role in ensuring this. As Ajit Mohanty says, language policy often means that students don't drop out of school, rather they are pushed out. As teachers, we need to focus on the issues which we can change and control in our classroom, and often the use and celebration of multilingualism and multilingual education is one such issue.

Thank you for listening to this episode of Teaching English with the British Council. We hope you enjoyed it. Please do like, subscribe, and review. And please remember to download the show notes and transcript. Join us next time for episode nine, where we will try to answer the question: how can I support my own and my students' mental wellbeing? Until then, goodbye.